

# the SECOND MESSENGER

## *St. Olaf Biology Alumni Newsletter*

### **Your Gift, Your Way**

Thank you, Biology Alumni, for your gifts to the St. Olaf Fund! Many of you have designated your donation to specifically support the Biology Department. We are so grateful! Every year, your generous donations enable the Biology Department to provide for extra things like student travel to conferences and the annual Senior Banquet. If you are already considering making a contribution, would you consider designating your gift to the "Biology Department?" If you are celebrating a reunion this year, your gift will be counted in your class gift as well. Thank you for your consideration!

### **A Lovely Retirement in the Woods**

After nearly 40 years at St. Olaf College in the Biology and Environmental Studies departments, Kathy Shea has retired!



We had a delightful celebration right under the canopy of trees she planted 30 years ago. It was so special! After enjoying a delicious meal together, faculty and emeriti shared their memories and well-wishes accompanied by the sounds of the woods.

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## Kathy Shea's Retirement, cont.

Charles Umbanhowar, current Director of the Natural Lands, presented a plaque honoring curators of the Natural Lands, showing Kathy's name added under Gene Bakko's. The plaque will hang in the kiosk at the entrance to the Natural Lands. After dinner, the group wandered down the path to see the red oak that was planted at the edge of the StoGrow Farm and to take a photo. What a beautiful reminder it will be of her involvement in implementing this innovative program linking the food that lands on our plates to the effort that goes into responsibly producing it.



### Thank you!

What an overwhelming response we had to our request for memories, photos, and words from all of you! Responses came from every decade of Kathy's tenure. The result was a book tracing her years here at St. Olaf. And the tree constructed with all your words describing Kathy will be a lasting reminder of her legacy.

*Kathy holds her gifts. "I'm so overwhelmed and humbled by the contributions from all the alumni!"*

## But that was not all!

Earlier in the day, unbeknownst to Kathy, a cohort of alumni was gathering in the newly remodeled Johnson Boardroom for a mini reunion. The surprise luncheon was planned months in advance for Kathy to visit with many of the former Student Naturalists with whom she had worked closely over the years.

Wes Braker ('18) and Annika Fredrickson ('18) casually invited Kathy to have lunch with them. While Kathy suspected that something was afoot, she had no idea she would reconnect with so many of her former students. She is pictured here (center) with all who could come.



FRONT ROW (L-R):

Allie Raduege ('21), Annika Fredrickson ('18), Kate Seybold ('15), Ellen Squires ('14), Kirsten Koerth ('19)

BACK ROW (L-R):

Andrew Hallberg ('18), Wes Braker ('18), Nic Partington ('19), Katie Myhre ('16), Andrew Larson ('19), Katie Hoffman ('21)

# Two Biology alums provide opportunity for adventure, creative expression

## Charlie Reinertsen ('13)

The end of June marked the one-year anniversary of the opening of the Climate Solutions exhibit at The Wild Center, a 3,000-square-foot permanent exhibit featuring immersive exhibits where visitors can explore and engage with climate solutions. I was brought on as the Exhibit Developer and Project Manager of "Climate Solutions" in March 2020. I served as the lead writer, strategist, and content developer, and led a team of Wild Center staff, board members, project advisors, as well as a team of consultants, indigenous leaders, and artists to bring the exhibit to final fruition. In addition to serving as the primary writer and strategist for the content, I contributed photography and videography throughout the digital interactives and print elements, including two 15-foot-tall prints featuring Adirondack landscapes. The Wild Center was named second-best science museum in the 2023 USA Today Best Of competition. You can read about the exhibit [here](#), and take a 3D tour [here](#).

After opening the exhibit, I launched my digital media studio, [Twolined](#), and I have supported clients through photography, videography, exhibit development, writing, and communications strategy. Through my business, I also serve as an expedition leader with World Wildlife Fund and Natural Habitat Adventures, guiding trips to visit the Monarch Butterfly Biosphere Reserve in Michoacán, Mexico in the high elevation oyamel fir forests (you can see one of my webinars on this trip and ecological phenomenon [here](#)). And finally, I guide trips in Yellowstone and Grand Teton National Park, connecting guests with our natural resources through adventure travel and environmental education.

## Ben Thwaits ('03)

Ben has spent the past four years pursuing a parallel passion as executive director of an international diplomacy nonprofit. However, he has recently returned to his roots as an artist and wilderness expedition leader. The pull of his core passion was inescapable. Starting this fall, Ben is leading a series of filmmaking and photography expeditions with some of the most accomplished artists on the planet, creating groundbreaking art and transformative experiences. The first expedition is with Cirina Catania near Ely, Minnesota in late August. Cirina is the co-founder of the Sundance Film Festival and longtime filmmaker with the likes of National Geographic and Discovery. Ben describes her as "one of the most passionate mentors and kind humans I've ever met." Ben is the Founder and Director at Blue Fractal. To find out more about his work or join one of his adventures, visit [www.bluefractal.net](http://www.bluefractal.net).

Editor's Note: While attending St. Olaf, Ben spent at least one summer at the Wilderness Field Station (in Ely where this August expedition will take place) studying and researching with Biology emeritus, Mike Swift.



# In heartfelt tribute...

Contributed by Anne Walter



We lost a beloved colleague and emeritus this summer. Mike Swift's enthusiasm for his research organism was infectious as was his overall enthusiasm to explore life broadly. If you close your eyes, you can hear him ask, "And what are the world's most beautiful insect larvae?" Almost all St. Olaf Biology alums know the answer is of course Chaoborus: the long, transparent tiny predator that uses its air sacs to vertically migrate in lakes all across the globe. During his time as a professor at St. Olaf, Mike brought his love of biological diversity to

all of his teaching from our then foundational course - Bio 126 - to his passion, limnology. Some of you had "all night" labs in that course to see what happens in the lake at night! Others learned to see Invertebrates for all their wonder and complexity in Invertebrate Biology. Still others will remember Mike's enthusiasm for vertebrate anatomy, especially the skeletons that are so beautifully adapted to different needs and can tell a story about the evolution and lifestyle of the animal. Some of you may remember Mike from Summer Bridge and others from summer courses or research with him at the Wilderness Field station in the Boundary Waters (aquatic biology, long days in a canoe, learning to master portages and paddle more or less straight!) Mike loved teaching in the field - Australia, Ecuador and Morocco as well as our own natural lands - so you might have had lessons in snorkeling or using binoculars or even getting the right fit for your rubber boots. He also may have taken your picture, especially if you were a cross country runner, presenting a poster, wearing your new outfits from India, or part of an art show. Mike Swift believed in your interests - he would turn up at your jazz or orchestra concert or art show, would help you find your job or graduate program, and help you get that fiddly piece of equipment to work. He is sorely missed and fondly remembered! Raise a glass - or your binoculars or paddle! - portage your canoe or don your rubber boots, and celebrate with us this life well lived!

# St. Olaf Biology Alumni Updates

## Krista Elhert ('11)

I'm an Assistant Professor and Extension State Range Specialist with South Dakota State University. In my role, I work directly with beef cattle producers and conduct research on topics such as precision ranching and riparian restoration. We have had several large grants come in on the precision ranching side - a \$1 million grant that is looking at integrating precision ranching technology (such as virtual fencing) into decision support tools for producers, and a \$80 million grant focused on climate smart agricultural practices. Here are a couple news releases with more information:

<https://www.morningagclips.com/sdsu-researchers-awarded-1-million-precision-ranching-grant/>

<https://www.sdstate.edu/news/2022/09/sdsu-receive-nearly-80-million-partnerships-climate-smart-commodities-initiative>

## Alex Wolner ('21)

This August I will be starting medical school at the University of Minnesota Medical School Duluth campus.

## Katie Block ('08)

I am a senior research scientist in the Center for Immunology at the University of Minnesota and my research was published late last year in *Nature Immunology*. The article is entitled "Physiological microbial exposure transiently inhibits mouse lung ILC2 responses to allergens."

## Rachel Gates Katkar ('06)

Zorro Katkar was born on Father's Day weighing 6 pounds, 15 ounces and is 19 inches long. Rachel, husband Ravi, and 5 year old big brother Ursino could not be happier. Rachel is spending the summer caring for little Zorro and then heading back to work in September at the University of Minnesota School of Dentistry. Rachel continues to support international dental students in a highly competitive program.



## Ellen Schuldt ('87)

I have stopped being a traveling occupational therapist, and I'm back in Minnesota. I'm still working as an OT, but at a company that works with people with mental illness, specifically doing hoarding intervention. It's quite interesting and challenging! I have no pictures to share with you. If any of you have problems with hoarding, or know somebody who does, you can get a book called *Buried in Treasures* by Steketee, Frost and Tolin. It's very helpful.

## Emily Johnson ('20)

Emily was one of seven Oles to receive a Fulbright award this year! She will study how Norwegian nature-based preschools foster social and emotional development. During her time at St. Olaf, she majored in Norwegian and biology with concentrations in educational and Nordic studies. She also studied abroad in Norway and Denmark, where she had a practicum at a forest preschool. Johnson thinks more attention should be focused on early education and is especially interested in the way some Norwegian preschools encourage relatively unsupervised playtime outside regardless of weather conditions.



(Taken from St. Olaf College June 20, 2023 news article)



# St. Olaf Biology Alumni Updates, cont.

## Shahrin Islam ('19)

I feel extremely lucky to have the privilege to attend UCSF School of Pharmacy, my dream school! I'm really excited to start this new chapter and delve into the world of pharmacy (and move to California!)

## AmberBeth VanNingen ('04)

AmberBeth VanNingen, plant ecologist with the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, met up with current Biology faculty, Diane Angell, at the Natural Areas Meetings in Duluth, MN September 2022. Read [this National Geographic article](#) to hear more about her work.



## John M Wilkenson ('73)

After 40+ years on the staff of the Mayo Clinic I was promoted to Professor of Family Medicine in early 2022. I was further honored later in the year as outlined below by my daughter, Elizabeth Wilkinson Cozine, MD.

My dad, [John Wilkinson](#), was among Mayo Clinic's 2022 Distinguished Educator awardees tonight. I was honored to sit beside him and enjoy our colleagues' applause and shouts of congratulations. What an honor to have your life's work (not only patient care, but especially your devotion to physicians' continuing education) celebrated in such a great way! I feel proud, Dad. It's a career highlight to get to work together.



## Cecilia Noecker ('12)

I am starting as Assistant Professor in the Department of Biological Sciences at Minnesota State University - Mankato in Fall 2023! I will be teaching microbiology and molecular biology, and my research lab will study microbial diversity and metabolism in mammalian gut microbiomes. After 10 years on the West Coast, I am excited to be back in Minnesota!

The Class of 2023 celebrated Kathy Shea this spring as the final founding member of the St. Olaf Omega Kappa chapter of the Beta Beta Beta honor society to retire.

Pictured with Kathy are 2023 chapter president Toni Zheleva and vice president Kina Msuya.





# Congratulations to the St. Olaf Biology Class of 2023!



Calvin Foss



Emma Rosen



Abigail Hullinger & Kevin Crisp



Paola Diaz, Margaret Dickey  
& Peyton Keech



Clare Collins &  
Teresa Pettitt-Kenney



Elizabeth Strandberg,  
Kristen Powell & Lia Wallace



Lucinda Patrus



Toni Zheleva & Kina Msuya



Kevin Crisp & Amenech Ashango



Kim Serrano



Arich Fruehling & Mackenzie Farrell



Anna Blonigen, Grace Bischke, Sarah  
Howdeshell, Lily Hanlon, Laura Johannes,  
& Erinn Chrisopher



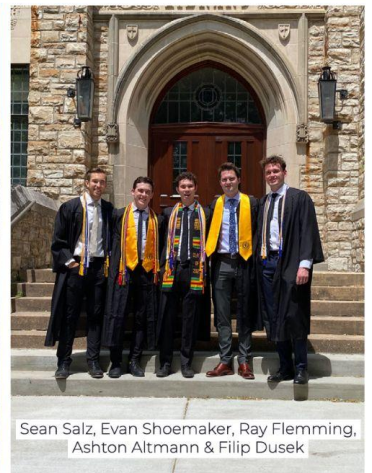
Andy Harrison & Clay Wilkens



Laura Bitner & Kaitlin Johnson



Mari Reid & Emma Gambach



Sean Salz, Evan Shoemaker, Ray Flemming,  
Ashton Altmann & Filip Dusek