





LIFE

Partners

Mac and Jackie Gimse have led 30 trips abroad for St. Olaf as a team that models both the values of the college and the makings of a successful marriage.

BY AMY GAGE

PHOTOGRAPH BY TOM ROSTER

It's no accident that St. Olaf College chose to name the Gimse International & Off-Campus Studies Photo Contest for both Mac '58 and Jackie Gimse, even though he is the professor emeritus and the artist with the more visible and publicly acclaimed accomplishments.

"It's been a cooperative journey," says Jackie Gimse, who retired as an adolescent psychiatric nurse in 2005, four years after her husband's retirement from St. Olaf, where he taught sculpture and art history courses for 31 years.

From raising two children to rehabilitating an old church south of campus as their home to leading study trips abroad and mentoring dozens of St. Olaf students, the Gimses have approached their married life as a duo, an inseparable team.

At a time before men, especially, talked about work-life "balance" or the integration of their personal and professional lives, Mac was recognizing and acknowledging his wife's contributions to his career. His four-page biography from the mid 1980s devotes a full paragraph to Jacquelyn Leone, the camp nurse whom he married in 1961 and with whom "I've been crazy in love for 46 years," he likes to say.

"They truly are partners," says the Gimses' daughter, Gracia McKinley '89, an arts administrator and yoga instructor who moved back to Northfield from the East Coast, where her husband is from, so her two children could benefit from Mac and Jackie's influence.

Her parents laugh about the moniker coined some years back by a clever Ole who had spent five months on a study-abroad program with the Gimses. "Mackie," she dubbed them, and the nickname has stuck. Since the first Global Semester they led in 1977, with their school-aged children in tow, the couple has hoped to "model our marriage as a cooperative and supportive couple," says Jackie, squeezing her husband's hand.

Nearly five decades into their relationship, they remain visibly and vitally in love. "Every day I can't wait to find out what she's got going," Mac says with a grin.

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AT HOME IN THE WORLD

The Gimses have led 30 study-travel trips abroad in the past three decades. Some, like Term in Asia and Term in the Middle East, have been for students looking to enrich their life perspective and worldview. Others, such as this fall’s “Art and Architecture of China and Tibet,” are through the college’s Center for Lifelong Learning — where the Gimses’ trips are among the most popular, according to executive director Karen Hansen ’77.

Like any long-married couple, Mac and Jackie finish one another’s sentences and laugh at the same jokes. They reminisce about the hard times, drawing lessons from past adversities. “We don’t look for the smooth path, necessarily,” says Mac, reflecting on their travels. He estimates that the couple has shepherded some 700 people overseas, mainly to non-Western locations, Jackie notes.

Their most traumatic experience was in 2000, when a student on Global Semester nearly drowned in Israel. Five students accidentally stepped into a riptide in the Mediterranean, prompting five other students — all varsity-level swimmers — to attempt a rescue with flotation devices. The students were in the water for more than an hour when one of the rescuers was torn away and pulled under, before “miraculously” landing on a sandbar, says Mac, where he was saved.

Israelis and Palestinians had gathered with the Global group to wait and pray. “All we could do was scream to orient them to shore,” Mac says quietly. Once the swimmers were safely on land the Gimses ordered a “group check” — a process that alphabetically assigns each traveler responsibility for two others in the group — “and then we all collapsed,” he says. “Those students became so close.”

Their team approach to life and work has served the Gimses well as international program leaders for St. Olaf. In the course of leading eight semester-long programs and a dozen Interim programs, they have refined the delicate balance of watching over students while allowing them to discover other cultures for themselves.

“They’re at such a young, impressionable age,” says Jackie, whose open-door policy and cherry-berry bars have made the Gimses’ art- and book-filled house in Dundas a home away from home for Oles throughout the years. She is proud of the travel scrapbooks that students have made for them, as well as the “friendship garden” that three students planted in the Gimses’ yard and which they still help her weed each spring.

Mac’s gregarious nature attracted students to him as a teacher, but it is Jackie’s maternal

warmth and practical background as a nurse that allowed her to be both caretaker and disciplinarian on the worldwide trips. “We let our hair down with students, and we laugh together a lot,” she says. “When you laugh, then you can get through the tough times.”

EXTENDED FAMILY

When the Gimses’ son, Chris Gimse ’90, got married in August 1999, he chose his father for a best man. “Through my whole life, he’s always been my best friend. He was always the guy who was there for me, the guy I could turn to,” says Chris, a manager with Fidelity National Information Services in the Twin Cities and the father of three girls.

Chris was nine years old and Gracia was 10 when the Gimses led their first St. Olaf semester abroad, followed by a seven-month sabbatical in Taiwan. “They put me in situations where I was exposed to so much diversity, to different cultures,” Chris says. “You realize there is a huge world out there besides what we see living in the suburban United States.”

Clearly the Gimses have opened the eyes of numerous Ole students and alumni in the three decades that they’ve been leading trips. An hour-long lunch with them easily extends throughout the afternoon as they describe the weddings they are part of, the reunion brunches they are hosting and the friendships they enjoy with parents of former students.

Gracia says her father brought humor and a “sense of playfulness” to the family and gives those gifts to his five grandchildren today. As for Jackie, “Nothing we did ever shocked her,” she says. “We were accepted, even when we tried to be bad.”

The Gimses are not scheduled to lead any programs beyond the two excursions to China and Tibet this fall through the Center for Lifelong Learning. “We’ve talked about making this the last big thing,” says Mac, who instilled in a generation of students the importance of capturing travel experiences through writing and photography. “We’re in our 70s. Some say we should quit while we’re ahead, or alive!”

But they’ll never stop traveling, stop learning, stop seeing the world. The college’s global perspective is ingrained too deeply. They are grateful to St. Olaf for that.

“They’re such a good team,” says Chris. “I couldn’t imagine either one of them leading an adventure like this on their own. She’s the great woman behind the man who helps manage the group and keep my dad organized. Together they make a true leader.” 🐾

AMY GAGE is the former director of marketing communications at St. Olaf College.