

# THE SOUTHWESTER

SOUTHWESTERN MICHIGAN COLLEGE | SPRING 2026

MAGAZINE

## Spring at SMC— plans, projects, and new beginnings



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# THE SOUTHWESTER

MAGAZINE



Christi Young, Dr. Stephen Jess,  
and Dr. Mary Young-Marcks



## Welcome to the Southwester!

The Southwester—written as Sou'Wester early on—was Southwestern Michigan College's newspaper for more than half a century. The paper was developed and distributed by SMC journalism students. In 1994, the paper won first-place national recognition from the Associated Collegiate Press at the University of Minnesota and from the American Scholastic Press Association in New York under 1989-1999 journalism adviser Dr. Chris Robinson. In 1999, color was incorporated into the paper and, in 2013, the paper was transferred into an electronic format. Today, the news stories are distributed on the college's website and shared on social media. To keep the tradition alive, The Southwester was transformed into this bi-annual magazine for the community, alumni, and donors to enjoy.

In this issue of The Southwester, you'll be introduced to SMC alumni who have made a success in their careers by building on their degrees from SMC. You'll also learn about some of the exciting things happening at the college.

To learn more about the college and programs featured in this publication, visit [swmich.edu](http://swmich.edu).

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**Dear Taxpayers, Alumni, and Friends of Southwestern Michigan College,**

Spring is a time of planning and renewal, and as the weather warms up and flowers are blooming, lots of good news abounds at your college.

The search for our ninth president has reached a successful conclusion, and Dr. Clint Pleasant has recently arrived at SMC. Dr. Pleasant has deep experience and a long list of accomplishments in higher education. Please join me in welcoming him and his family. You can read more about him on pages 12 and 13 of this issue of *The Southwester*.

I want to thank Mr. Brent Brewer, who served as interim president, tirelessly devoting himself to this transition period while doubling his work load during the last year. Brent really stepped up for the college, and we all appreciate his fine work.

Enrollment at SMC has now grown for eight consecutive semesters, up 8.8% in student count and 10.9% in credit hours this spring, the second-highest figure in Michigan. The college has announced new academic offerings as we debut a degree in respiratory therapy, a certificate in criminal justice, and a credential for child development associate.

We recently dedicated a new 11,195-sq.-ft. wrestling facility that was built with existing funding. This unique project has quadrupled the space, doubled our mat capacity, added a dedicated fitness and warm-up area, created offices for coaches, and expanded public restrooms located in the Charles O. Zollar Building. We'll now focus on extensive remodeling of the performing arts facilities in the Dale A. Lyons Building. These expansions will give SMC students room to grow and the ability to thrive and strengthen relationships by participating in the activities they love.

Our athletic teams continue to amaze, with SMC winning MCCA Western Conference titles in women's cross country, women's volleyball, and men's wrestling. Four Roadrunners (so far!) have been named All-Americans this year, while the 2025-26 season also saw the successful debut of women's wrestling and the return of men's and women's indoor and outdoor track and field.

We enjoyed the performances of the choir and band, and last month's musical "You're A Good Man, Charlie Brown" was fantastic! The cost of admission to these types of events is minimal—often free—and we encourage you to come to campus with your family to enjoy them.

Our trustee spotlight this spring features alumnus Vice Chairman Tracy Hertsel, who has served SMC since 2020 and the local education community for over 35 years. Please take time to read all of the inspiring accounts of our students, faculty, and alumni moving the world forward in law, technology, nursing, automotive, and other fields.

Hope to see you on the Dowagiac or Niles campus soon!

Thomas F. Jerdon  
Chairman, SMC Board of Trustees





2016 Automotive

# Graduate Wears Many Zolman Hats



**A**lex Severinghaus wears a lot of hats as regional store manager for Zolman's Best One Tire and Auto Care's three Michigan retail locations in Niles, Kalamazoo, and Portage.

Only 10 years after completing the Southwestern Michigan College automotive program, Severinghaus, of Niles, oversees 25 people. This October he will mark a decade with Zolman, which has 14 locations in all.

The 30-year old came full circle last October at SMC's Automotive Day, climbing up on stage to address students seated where he once sat as a Brandywine High School senior listening to Nate Zolman.

"I was so nervous," he said. "I'm just an everyday person

trying my best, so it was an honor."

## A man of many hats

He started with Zolman in 2016, slinging tires and changing oil on Monroe Street in downtown South Bend. The years flew by and the job evolved.

"Not only are we managers, we're therapists because we're there to listen, if we need to," he said. "We're financial guidance people. We are plumbers if we have to fix something. We're janitors if we have to clean up after everything. We just wear multiple hats throughout the day to help our team be everything they want to be and that we need them to be.

"On a personal level," Severinghaus continued, "we're all human. We understand that

there are problems at home. We understand that you might be having a bad week. We want to help. You have to have that personal side, show empathy and be human.

"There's that aspect, too, when you're dealing with the public on a daily basis. You're telling them good news throughout the day, hopefully," he said, "but it could be bad news, that their second-greatest investment, their vehicle, needs work. No one wants to hear that. No one wants to spend the money to fix that, but, unfortunately, they have to.

"It's not always an easy conversation to have, and you don't know how they're going to react. You have to answer their questions with educated answers, and if they don't under-



stand, you have to break it down in more layman terms and create analogies they can relate to. It takes tons of trust in the people you're working with."

### **Service writing opened the door**

"For whatever reason I wanted to try service writing," he said. "They did hybrid positions where you worked out back in the morning, then in the afternoon you put on a polo, looked presentable, and came up front."

"It was an opportunity to learn something new," Severinghaus said. "I knew I could make more money if I was a service writer, and with cystic fibrosis, I knew it was a better long-term decision because the shop was full of fumes and exhaust—especially in the winter."

Service writing "is your first line of defense," he said, making it sound like a nurse or medical intermediary who gets you ready to see a doctor or, in his case, the mechanic or technician.

"The consumer drops their vehicle off and explains what's going on, and they're here for a tire rotation or an oil change. You check them in, create a work order, look up fluid capacities, parts, everything that vehicle needs, and get it out to the technician. You create a quote, find parts as needed, and look up mileage and maintenance recommendations. You're also responsible for the appearance of the facility, time management for appointments. It's kind of like a puzzle every day.

"Then I got more into the management side," Severinghaus said. "Taking on more responsibility for the store and the employees, dealing with more than customers—complaints, hiring, firing."

### **'I like helping people'**

"I like helping people," he said, "watching people grow, finding out their wants and needs, whether it's personally or professionally, and being able to help them achieve those goals. People helped me reach my ambitions, and I wanted to be that person for someone else—paying it forward."

While at SMC, Severinghaus worked part-time in the feed department at Rural King. He also drove the forklift to unload the trucks.

"Just one part-time job wasn't paying for gas, so I picked up a second job. I'd start there, go to class, have a little time in between, then go to the second job. Then I had an opportunity to work at Pro Muffler, which got my feet wet in the real world outside of shop time at SMC. I was there three or four months before they let

me go, but it gave me the real-life aspect of what day-to-day shop life would be."

Severinghaus also worked for the former Shelton's Farm Market. "I was a meat clerk. They worked with high school and college students with flexible scheduling. I could work part of the morning, go to class, then come back and work in the afternoon. It definitely helped that they were willing to work with me.

"I couch-surfed a lot," he shared about his student days. "I also spent a lot of time at the gym because they had showers and a microwave so I could warm up food."

### **'There had to be something more'**

He never gave up, though.

"I knew there had to be something more," Severinghaus said. "I refused to live in a mindset where I was going to give up. I would have nothing without perseverance. I wanted better for myself, and I knew I had to make it happen. Nobody was going to do it for me."

Severinghaus was born with cystic fibrosis, an incurable chronic disease causing thick, sticky mucus that clogs the lungs and obstructs the pancreas, leading to severe breathing problems, persistent lung infections, and malabsorption of nutrients.

"Growing up with a single parent, my mom faced medical challenges with me, but she still provided a roof over our heads," he said. "She never gave up, though I know she wanted to multiple times. Piggyback that with nobody owes you anything. If you want something, you have to go get it. My grandfather instilled that in me. Nothing is free. You've got to go work for it."

Not a stranger to life challenges, Severinghaus recently navigated another one—the loss of his grandfather.

"He was practically my dad, so it's a big life change," he said. "He had been fighting leukemia for the last two years. He lived in Big Rapids, so I moved him down to live with me in Niles. When he passed, I lost one of my best friends."

He married his other best friend, Tiaira, last October, just a couple of weeks after speaking at SMC. "We went to high school together," he said. "We were always part of the same friend group." She also works at Zolman, where she works with accounts.

Severinghaus may think of himself as an everyday individual, but there's nothing ordinary about his determination to give his best and never give up. He's a true Roadrunner who keeps moving forward toward his dreams.

# 43 Years IN Nursing FOR '81 GRADUATE

**K**athy (Eby) Mikel, a 1981 Southwestern Michigan College nursing graduate, "retired" last June from South Bend's Memorial Hospital after almost 43 years of service.

Memorial, a 647-bed hospital, is part of Beacon Health System.

"I worked as an RN in NICU for 10 years and on the mother/baby unit as a lactation consultant for more than 32 years," she said.

Neonatal Intensive Care Units are specialized hospital departments for newborns, typically under 28 days old, requiring advanced, around-the-clock medical attention for premature birth, low birth weight, or severe health conditions.

"I help new moms and babies with breastfeeding difficulties," she said. "I did strictly NICU staff nursing for 10 years. Then I started having my own children and got into lactation consulting, and that became my passion in nursing."

When Mikel graduated from SMC, her first job was in Fort Wayne at Lutheran Hospital for 10 months before moving back to northern Indiana.

After retiring, the Wakarusa resident managed to stay idle for three months before returning to the hospital in October. Now she works an average of two to four days a month. "After 43 years, I just didn't think I could



quit cold turkey. I guess working in one facility for so many years is kind of unusual anymore, but I loved what I was doing, and I liked working at Memorial, so I stayed."

#### **Pink uniforms and volleyball**

Mikel's graduating class contained 31 associate degrees and 33 one-year practical nursing students. The nurses wore pink uniforms and were capped rather than pinned. The men





received chevron bars. Eileen Parks, the “intimidating” dean of the nursing school, conducted the ceremony.

“I also played volleyball at SMC,” Mikel said, “even though Dean Parks didn’t like her students to do anything other than be in the nursing program.”

After graduating from NorthWood High School in Nappanee—part of the Wa-Nee Community School System shared with Wakarusa—Mikel started college at Indiana University in Bloomington.

“After freshman year, I transferred to SMC to get my nursing degree,” she said. “I knew I wanted a health care field, though I wasn’t sure what that was when I graduated high school.”

Family members influenced her decision to pursue nursing.

“My mom never finished her nursing degree, but she worked for 30-some years in what would now be called medical assisting at a clinic in Wakarusa. My sister, who was two years older than me was also going into nursing,” Mikel said.

“My grandmother worked as an aide for a long time.”

Though she often returned to campus to participate in the annual Steve’s Run, Mikel has not been back to SMC since the nursing and health services building expanded in 2019.

“Back then,” before the addition of three residence halls, “everyone was a commuter,” Mikel said. She lived with her aunt in Edwardsburg to shorten the drive.

“It was tough because you had to take 21 or 22 credits each semester to graduate on time,” she recalled.

She took advantage of one January break to pick up cross-country skiing for physical education credit. “The next January break I did a speech class.

“I had a year of college under my belt,” Mikel said, “but I had never worked as an aide or LPN, like a lot of people in my program. They were already comfortable with patient care. I was comfortable with the academic stuff, but I struggled

at first with patient care because it was new.”

#### **Four daughters, two granddaughters**

Mikel married her high school sweetheart the month after graduating from SMC.

Her oldest daughter in Benton Harbor is going to be 42, the youngest in Denver is 30. “We just got back from seeing her. My third daughter just moved around the corner from us so we babysit our granddaughters twice a week. My second daughter died in a car accident in 2004 when she was a junior in high school. She became an organ tissue donor, so we are also active with Donate Life in Indiana,” an Indianapolis-based nonprofit organization.

“Our oldest granddaughter was born on the anniversary of my daughter’s car accident.

“Working at Memorial for so long,” she said, “they were like my second family and really helped me during that time when I went back to work after my daughter died.

“My parents are still alive,” Mikel said. “They’re 90 and 87 and live just a mile up the road from us. My brother and sister are also close. My mother-in-law isn’t very far away, either, so we have family all around us.”

#### **Looking ahead**

Although full retirement is not in the immediate picture, she has plans for the next chapter of her life.

“My husband and I like to hike at state parks,” Mikel said. “We’re going to Pokagon in Angola, and we’d like to do a riverboat cruise.

“We’re also looking at downsizing. We have a 100-year-old farmhouse on three acres. We’re looking at building a smaller, single-story home in Wakarusa.”

Overall Mikel is glad she got into nursing and that SMC had a two-year associate degree. “I wanted a health care field, and I liked helping new moms and babies” she said. “I’m grateful I was able to get those goals met at Southwestern Michigan College.”



Wrestling Facility  
Dedicated April 8...with

# More Growth to Come



Proposed choir room



Proposed band room

**W**hen your mission is “Knowledge for All,” and promotes an education that features the whole college experience, you need to deliver. Academically, Southwestern Michigan College has done that since it first opened its doors. But a lot of learning occurs outside of the classroom. Since our inception, we’ve been continuing to grow our “non-academic” learning opportunities as well. That’s why Southwestern Michigan College undertook the Room to Grow capital campaign.

Room to Grow provides dedicated space for SMC’s growing wrestling program, including a larger competition and training area, especially critical as the program expanded rapidly with women joining the mix in Fall 2025. Only 29 NJCAA schools offer women’s wrestling. SMC was the first in Michigan to offer this increasingly popular sport to women.

Until moving into the new facility this March, National Coach of the Year Todd Hesson’s wrestlers were housed in an area across from the theatre in the Dale A. Lyons Building. The space was never meant to be the team’s permanent home. It was just a stepping stone until the team could establish itself again, athletics having returned to SMC in 2021 after a 25-year absence.

Room to Grow’s upgrade

enabled the wrestling program to occupy a new wing of the Charles O. Zollar Building. The Zollar expansion increased available wrestling space from 2,688 to 11,195 square feet. It more than doubled mat capacity, providing enhanced opportunities for training and competition. The new wrestling facility features locker rooms for men and women wrestlers, a dedicated fitness and warm-up area for conditioning with treadmills and bikes, additional restroom facilities to accommodate more athletes and spectators, and offices for the head coach and assistants.

Another benefit, the Roadrunners can now host regional and conference meets on campus—something SMC has not been able to do.

Since SMC wrestlers now occupy the same building as other athletic programs, they will benefit from interaction among other student athletes, creating camaraderie as our teams “run as one.”

Room to Grow, however, has only completed its initial phase and is now focused on the fine arts needs in the Dale A. Lyons Building. First, the current long, rectangular choir room—originally set up for offices, not musical instruction—will be expanded. The new area, which will begin to take shape this summer, will feature a round design, allowing singers and

Director of Choral Activities David Carew to see and hear each other while practicing.

Director of Bands Mark Hollandsworth’s band room, which also contains instrument storage space, is more than 30 years old and is too small, accommodating chairs for just 40 members.

It will be enlarged to provide more rehearsal and practice space and to accommodate the growing number of band members.

The new band room will add 1,980 square feet to accommodate 20 additional members and a more open rehearsal space. The Jazz Ensemble will also gain a dedicated practice area. A new flexible multipurpose classroom will host music theory classes, and four ensemble rooms and six practice rooms will give groups more flexibility and practice space.

A renovated lobby and bathrooms in the building will feature modern lighting and flooring, along with a lighter color palette, to create a more welcoming atmosphere for students, guests, and the community.

The new space allows both programs, which welcome students of all majors, to host larger community events and clinics, helping recruit future students and enhancing the sense of pride current students feel.

## How You Can Help

Every contribution, no matter the size, makes a difference. While our goal covers only a portion of the total project cost, we’re counting on the support of friends and donors to help us provide these much-needed facilities for our students.

To give, visit [givebutter.com/roomtogrow](https://givebutter.com/roomtogrow) or contact Emily Schrock, Manager of Development, at [eschrock02@swmich.edu](mailto:eschrock02@swmich.edu).

# Practicing law with technology

**J**oshua Goodrich graduated from Southwestern Michigan College in 2004 with Associate of Applied Science degrees in microcomputer programming and Local Area Network (LAN)/hardware support in preparation for the technology career he envisioned.

"At that time I was planning a career entirely in technology," said Goodrich. It was his foundation and comfort zone.

From 2001-03,  
Goodrich was  
employed by

SMC as a computer technician, supporting faculty, staff, and students.

"The 'law' seed was planted after I left SMC to work at Cornell University in the College of Human Ecology," he said.

"My supervisor's supervisor held a JD (Juris Doctor) but did not practice law. He and I talked often about career paths, and he advised that if I wanted to reach a CIO-level role, a JD might be more valuable than another technical degree or an MBA. He believed that law and technology would increasingly intersect."

Not only did that advice stay with him, while at Cornell, Goodrich took two law courses.

"After Cornell, I moved

to Miami University as a software licensing and acquisition manager. That position was grant-funded, and the funding ended approximately six weeks after I was hired, converting the role into a one-year contract," Goodrich said.

It was at this point that he decided to aggressively pursue his undergraduate degree. He took 27 credit hours in one semester, made the Dean's List, finished his bachelor of arts, and then headed to law school.

"Even after earning my JD from Thomas Jefferson School of Law (San Diego), my plan was still to remain in the technology field. However, after several years without formal technical employment, I found it difficult to re-enter the field. To bridge that gap, I pursued an LL.M. (Master of Laws) in intellectual property and technology law as a capstone degree."



## Cass County roots run deep

Goodrich graduated from Marcellus High School in 2000. In fact, five generations of his family are from Cass County. Those were among the factors that influenced his decision to attend SMC.

"My mother attended SMC when I was younger, and I remember coming to campus with her while she took classes," he said. "I was also awarded the Michigan Merit Award Scholarship, which provided \$2,500 for in-state education. Attending a community college allowed me to stretch those funds as far as possible while receiving a strong technical education."

Today, Goodrich practices primarily in what he refers to as a rectangle covering Battle Creek, Grand Rapids, Kalamazoo, and Lansing. "One notable case involved defending a drone operator who flew a drone over the Green Day concert at Comerica Park and was investigated for alleged violations of state law, federal law, and FAA civil regulations," he said.

He has also taught cybersecurity and computer networking at Western Michigan University but will be teaching adjunct for a different school next term.

"Like most attorneys, I rely on a structured booking schedule. I block my calendar well in advance and plan carefully around court appearances, teaching obligations, and client needs.

"I have not appeared before the United States Supreme Court, but I am admitted to practice before it." He also has a petition before the Michigan Supreme Court.

### All students commuted

"As both an SMC student and an employee, I have many memories of campus," he said. "At that time, the Dowagiac campus had no residence halls. All students were commuters. By 9 p.m. the campus was essentially empty."

Most of Goodrich's information technology (IT) classes were in the Lyons and O'Leary buildings.

"Students often spent time in the library or in the College Services Building, now the David C. Briegel Building.

"I spent most of my time in my office.

Because I could flex my work hours and take classes at night, I was often on campus from approximately 7:30 or 8 a.m. until 9 p.m., Monday through Thursday."

He also recalls that Kay Weimer, chair of the Information Systems Department, influenced his path, encouraging him to learn COBOL.

### 'Lighthouse,' the law, and robocalls

Goodrich is the principal attorney of Lighthouse Litigation, PLLC, which he founded in 2019. His work centers on consumer-protection and civil-rights litigation with a technology focus.

"I did not want to name the firm after myself. ...Historically, lighthouses have served as essential beacons, guiding ships safely and warning of danger for centuries. That symbolism aligns with my practice philosophy. Many of my clients come to me when they are in difficult and uncertain situations."

Before becoming a lawyer, he worked in the IT departments of SMC, Cornell University, and Miami University. He is a cybersecurity professional with industry certifications from (ISC)<sup>2</sup> in Cybersecurity and from CompTIA in ITF+, Cloud Essentials, A+, Network+, Server+, Security+ and Project+. Additionally, he is trained as a Certified Ethical Hacker. In this role, he concentrated on "red team" penetration testing, identifying weaknesses in various companies' cybersecurity infrastructures.

During law school, Goodrich served on the American Bar Association Law Student Division Board of Governors, representing the law schools comprising the 9th Circuit in the ABA-Law Student Division. It was during his law school tenure that he underwent his first training in Alternative Dispute Resolution, initiating his journey to become a mediator. He also belongs to the National Press Photographers Association.



### Rising Star in battling robocalls

He has recently been honored with two professional distinctions: selection to the 2025 Super Lawyers Rising Stars list for excellence in consumer law and induction as a Fellow of the American Bar Foundation (ABF), an honorary society of lawyers, judges, and scholars recognizing outstanding dedication to the legal profession and the community.

Membership is limited to less than 1 percent of attorneys licensed to practice in each jurisdiction and is based on peer nomination and ABF board approval.

His Super Lawyers Rising Stars status recognized his work in consumer law, with a specific emphasis on litigation under the Telephone Consumer Protection Act (TCPA)—a federal law designed to protect consumers from unwanted robocalls, spam texts, and autodialed communications.

The Super Lawyers Rising Stars list is a prestigious honor recognizing attorneys either under 40 or with less than 10 years of practice who have demonstrated exceptional legal ability and peer recognition. Only 2.5 percent of attorneys in Michigan are selected each year following a rigorous evaluation and peer nomination process.

Goodrich attributes his professional trajectory to the practical, student-centered education he received at SMC.

"SMC gave me the technical fluency and problem-solving mindset I use every day, in court, in the classroom, and with clients."

# It's spring

—a time of plans,  
projects, and



There's also a new Roadrunner on campus: Dr. Klint Pleasant assumed his responsibilities as SMC's ninth president on April 6.

"To say Rachel and I are excited would be an understatement," Pleasant said. "As I have studied the history of SMC and pored over information related to the Cass County region, I have been so impressed with the sense of community and pride. Our motto, 'Knowledge for All'—along with our commitment to provide accessible education in the region—are values worth upholding."

During a national search, SMC evaluated 128 applications. Twelve semi-finalists were interviewed remotely and, from that group, four finalists were chosen for on-campus interviews, with

Dr. Pleasant emerging as the top candidate.

"Dr. Pleasant brings a wealth of experience to SMC in academics, enrollment management and strategy, fundraising, and athletics, just to name a few," said Board Vice Chairman Tracy D. Hertsel, who is a retired educator and former superintendent.

"He is an extremely qualified administrator in the higher education arena," added Trustee Dr. Elaine Foster, who has more than 40 years of service in higher education. "He has spent time in the key operational areas of higher education, including academics."



These experiences have provided him with the necessary skills to operate a complex organization like Southwestern Michigan College.”

Dr. Pleasant, a lifetime Michigander, has worked in higher education for 28 years and has spent the last 20 years in administration. He earned a Bachelor of Science in Kinesiology from Lipscomb University, a Master of Arts in Education from the University of Tennessee, and a Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership and Strategic Change from Lipscomb University. Since 2017, he has served as the Senior Vice President and Special Assistant to the President at Rochester Christian University (RCU) in Rochester Hills, Mich. Since 2005, Pleasant has spent time managing enrollment, development, and athletics. Additionally, he has been involved with strategic planning, student mentoring, student retention, and community relations. He has also served as an instructor in the classroom

and is a published author.

In addition to Pleasant's expertise in higher education administration, he has been a highly successful college basketball coach and was recently inducted into the Michigan Basketball Hall of Fame. He is one of the top 25 most successful coaches in the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics and has captured numerous “Coach of the Year” awards while leading his teams to both conference and national championships.

Pleasant's teams have been known not only for their performance on the hardwood, but also in the classroom and in the community. Pleasant, along with his father and brother, manage the largest basketball camp in the state of Michigan which also is known for teaching life skills such as character and attitude. He has made coaching stops at Wayne State University, Abilene Christian University, and Kent State University, where he helped lead the Golden Flashes

to National Collegiate Athletic Association Division I Elite Eight appearance.

A sought-after speaker, Pleasant is often tapped for conferences and has led numerous leadership retreats.

He has also helped manage transition at RCU, transforming the athletic department into an extension of the enrollment office. Under his leadership, the student-athlete population grew from 135 to 430, growing the athletic department from eight varsity sports to 23 and bringing critical net tuition revenue dollars to the institution. He also led the RCU enrollment office (both student-athletes and non-student-athletes) to its highest headcount total in the 65-year history of the institution, while maintaining a strong fundraising portfolio and securing multiple major gifts over the years.

He and his wife share a passion for the arts. Appreciating the importance of performing and visual arts at SMC as they do, they are especially excited to be joining the campus community as Phase II of SMC's Room to Grow campaign begins.

Pleasant succeeds Dr. Joe Odenwald, now Alma College president. He will be working closely with Brent Brewer, who had served as interim president since May 2025, and the rest of the Senior Leadership Team at SMC.

Welcome to campus, Dr. Pleasant. Here's to SMC and the exciting days ahead!

# new beginnings...

# Couple Met

at SMC  
During  
Pandemic



**W**hen Maya Taulbee enrolled at Southwestern Michigan College, she never imagined that one of the most important lessons she learned wouldn't come from a textbook. This pandemic romance started in February 2020 on the Dowagiac campus when a mutual friend introduced Maya to Mallory Gray, then a student resident finishing her second degree in graphic design.

"From there, our relationship blossomed in the places that defined our lives as students," Maya recalled. "I would visit Mallory at the residence hall during visitor hours, and we spent countless hours together across campus."

To the couple, SMC wasn't just a place to get an education. It was the backdrop for their love story, with every corner of campus holding a special memory.

"Our time at SMC was just the beginning. After graduating, our relationship continued to grow,

leading us to our wedding in 2025, in Marquette, Mich., when we officially became Maya and Mallory Graybee.

"We are forever grateful to SMC for bringing us together and for providing the foundation for our future. The campus, from the dorms to the labs, will always be the place where our forever began."

Maya was a dual-enrolled high school/college student starting in Fall 2017 at Edwardsburg High School. Her goal was to complete prerequisite courses for SMC's paralegal degree program. After she graduated high school in 2019, she enrolled full-time at SMC for that fall, living off campus at her parents' Niles home.

"I chose SMC so I could continue my credits at the school where I was dually enrolled," she shared. "In Fall 2020, I took a break from SMC but returned virtually in Fall 2021 to complete my general education degree so I could transfer and complete my bachelor's at Northern Michigan University. I started at NMU in the fall of 2023 as a Global Campus student and graduated this past December."

Mallory came from Lawton and attended Lawton schools. She chose SMC

because her sibling was an alumnus, and she had fond memories of his experience and how campus life was a first step for him in learning how to be independent.

Dorm life helped Mallory gain a sense of self as she navigated the path of young adulthood. She was also able to attend with Copper, her emotional support animal. He was a huge part of Mallory establishing herself at SMC. Together, they forged friendships, attended campus events, took long walks on the grounds, and enjoyed the campus trails.

### Dating During COVID

Mallory and Maya started dating in March 2020, during the beginning of the pandemic.

"We had many virtual dates when Mallory lived on campus and I was at home in Niles," Maya said. "The pandemic was forcing us to navigate a new world of isolation by leaning exclusively on one another. While the outside world came to a standstill, our connection was fast-tracked; the typical milestones of dating were replaced by social-distancing walks on SMC's trails with her dog, Cooper.

"As much as outdoor activities kept us in each other's social circles, the virtual

world kept us together through our deep conversations, binge-watching shows that were prevalent at the time, and the unique challenge of building a life together under one roof much sooner than planned." In June 2020 Mallory got her first apartment while she finished her graphic design degree off-campus.

"The very circumstances that kept the world apart are what bound us together, transforming a new romance into the unwavering partnership we share today as wives. I asked Mallory to marry me in January 2021, and though uncertain of the future, she happily said yes. A few months later, we took a trip that inspired the next chapter of our lives."

### 'Based' in the UP

"After Mallory graduated from SMC, we moved to the Upper Peninsula in June 2021, specifically KI Sawyer, about 20 minutes outside of Marquette. We had visited the area in April 2021, as that's where my family is originally from, and where I had planned to attend college had I not come to SMC. We lived 'on base' (KI Sawyer is an old decommissioned Air Force base) until July 2023, when we moved back to Dowagiac into our first home.

"Something of note about our time in the UP was our active, and still active, involvement in a local non-profit, Let's Grow KI. It's a nonprofit that offers nutrition/gardening workshops to local residents and hosts a community garden space. I have served on the board, and Mallory is the graphic design lead and communications committee leader.

"After being away from our 'home away from home,' we decided to get married at Presque Isle in Marquette. To us, being outdoors with our loved ones at one of the most beautiful places in Marquette made our day extremely special. The UP, specifically Marquette, KI Sawyer, and Gwinn, will always hold a special place in our hearts."

Currently, Maya works as a project manager. Mallory works at a veterinary office, Paw Paw Vet Clinic.

"When we are not working," Maya said, "you can catch us volunteering, spending time with our fur kids, trying out new local eateries, or at the beach."



# Revered Professor Taught 39 Years

Dr. Stephen E. Jess, former Southwestern Michigan College social studies instructor, died March 11 at 84. He retired in 2016 after 39 years teaching an estimated 7,000 students.

Before he joined the SMC history faculty in 1977, Dr. Jess taught at the University of Nebraska, from which he earned his doctorate and master of arts degree in English history.

Jess was honored during SMC's 49th Commencement ceremony on May 7, 2016. "During his time at SMC," Board of Trustees Chairman Thomas F. Jerdon shared, "Dr. Jess' former students became SMC professors (such as Dr. Jeff Dennis) or administrators (such as Senior Vice President and Chief Strategy Officer Brent Brewer). A couple, like Becky Moore and myself, became SMC trustees."

President David Mathews said, "Each one of us here, our legacy won't be programs, buildings, or anything other than individual students whose lives we touched. Sometimes we do that without even knowing. After 7,000

students, Steve Jess has had a tremendous amount of impact. One I know about by accident...several years ago I was at Fort Michilimackinac in Mackinaw City. One of the persons in period costume showing us around went to SMC. Her passion for history had been influenced by Dr. Jess. She was living her dream by working in a historical teaching context."

Despite his long SMC career spanning generations and impacting thousands of students, it almost never started.

"Originally I wasn't thinking about teaching, but a friend of mine was going to apply (for college) and asked me if I wanted to ride along," Jess said. "So I rode along with him. We went to the registrar's office, and they handed me an application too. So I filled it out, and a week or two later I got a letter saying I was accepted. So I went to school."

During schooling, Dr. Jess went back to the Navy on temporary active duty teaching summer classes. It was then that he got his first taste of teaching. "I thought that seemed like it might



be something interesting to do," he said.

Dr. Jess began teaching at the University of Nebraska in Lincoln where he received his Ph.D., but he only taught there a few years before transferring to SMC.

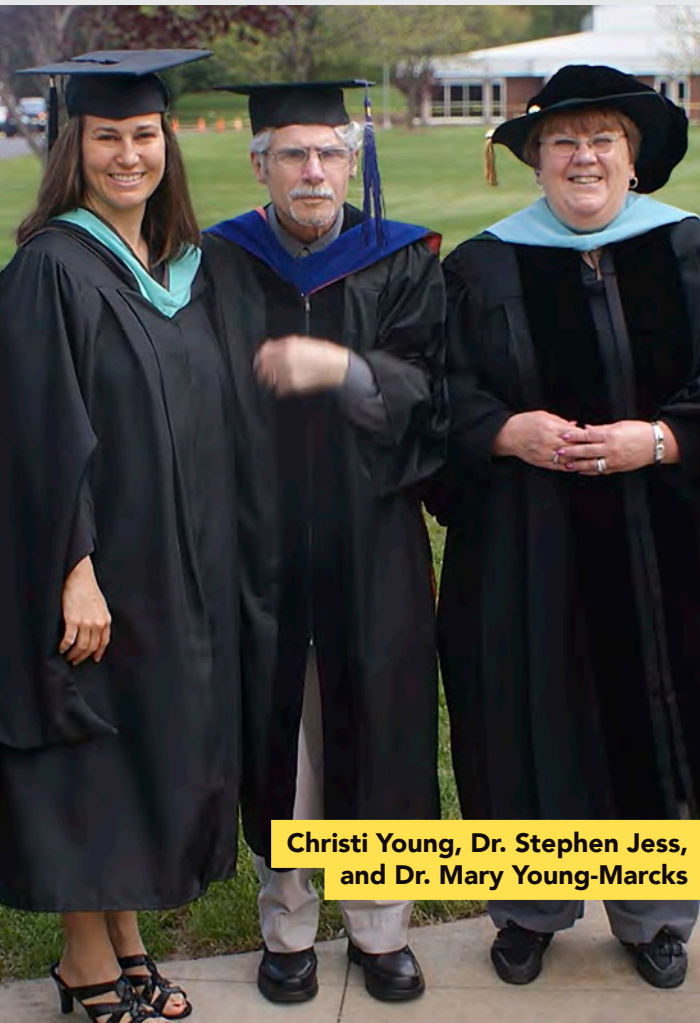
"(SMC) said they were looking for someone to chair the social science department and teach history. They got the name wrong; they said "Bowagiac," he said. "I said I didn't know where it is, but I'll go there because it was in Michigan. It was a lot closer to the part of the country I wanted to be in."

It's something of a coincidence that Dr. Jess ended up in Michigan.

Even his students in Nebraska seemed to think he belonged here.

"I spent a couple years teaching at Plains Community College in Nebraska," Dr. Jess said. "I'm from Wisconsin, but when I was in Nebraska my students told me I sounded like I didn't come from around there originally. They said, 'You sound like you came from somewhere out east like Michigan.'"

"You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown," besides being the March 2026 spring musical, had the distinction of being the last production in the O'Leary lecture hall, which doubled as the



**Christi Young, Dr. Stephen Jess, and Dr. Mary Young-Marcks**



**Dr. Stephen Jess with Dr. Jeff Dennis**



theatre before the Dale A. Lyons Building. It ran April 5, 6, and 7, 1979. There were large children's blocks on stage that were props in the play. Dr. Jess stacked them on top of each other and did his whole day's lecture from atop those blocks.

Dr. Dennis, a former student-turned-colleague, held him in high esteem. "He is a most gentle and kind colleague, and one of the most diligent instructors on our campus..." Dr. Dennis once told *The Southwester*. "While impressively intelligent, he also displays wonderful humility and generosity of spirit. Dr. Steve Jess is a truly good person

that I very much have been privileged to know."

Over the years, Dr. Jess saw the college grow from a few small buildings in the middle of nowhere to the institution of today. While he had to adapt to new technologies, Dr. Jess said teaching remained the same as 30 years before. His favorite part of teaching was the classroom experience. He enjoyed "the interaction with the students and the classroom dynamic which is unique for every class," he said.

"Each class is different and you may do a lot of the same material, but it's never the same because you

are always dealing with a different group of people in each class, each semester."

Despite decades of experience, Dr. Jess said it did not get easier.

"There's always work to be done," he said. "You have to keep up with what's going on with whatever fields you're instructing, and there's lots of administrative stuff you have to do, record keeping, so it keeps you busy."

When Dr. Jess was not teaching or studying something teaching-related, he liked to collect things, including coins.

After an old colleague got him interested, Dr. Jess

acquired quite an extensive collection of 16th and 17th century artifacts, including a piece of paper printed just 40 years after the printing press was invented.

Dr. Jess' advice to students was simple: "Be there. Go to class. Keep up with the work. Take the exams. If a person does that they should be okay," he said. "And if you can, develop an interest, if you don't already have one, in the course you're taking regardless of what it is. You never know what material you take in courses that might later be of assistance to you."

# 'My Memories of SMC

## Are Life-Changing'



**F**lorida tour guide Chris Kelly came to Southwestern Michigan College in Fall 1985 after taking a year off from college.

His sister, Stephanie, was a highly recruited Indiana high school track and cross country athlete who ran for SMC.

"I guess Coach Gunn agreed to have me walk-on the cross country team per my sister's request," Kelly said. "I went to SMC for a variety of reasons. I needed structure and discipline. I needed to get my life back on track academically, and I needed to fulfill a promise I made to my mother about getting a college degree."

He graduated from SMC in 1986 with a degree in graphic design.

### He lived on Diamond Lake

Kelly graduated in 1982 from Rensselaer, Ind., Central High School.

"Coach Gunn housed all of his athletes together around the area. Back then, SMC did not have dormitories," Kelly said. "I lived with three other runners in Cassopolis on Diamond Lake during my time at SMC."

"My memories of SMC are life-changing. I matured in the classroom, graduated with a 3.0 GPA and, with Coach Gunn's leadership, qualified for national competition in cross country and

track. I won my first collegiate race in an SMC singlet."

He won the 1985 alumni race and placed fourth at cross country regionals. He made All Michigan Community College Athletic Association State and All Region IV.

"Coach Gunn was instrumental in making sure I got a D1 scholarship," Kelly said.

At the cold, wet nationals in Schaumburg, Ill., the Roadrunners finished 12th, with Kelly SMC's best at 37th. He completed the Milwaukee Meet in sixth place.

He was recruited by The Ohio State University, the University of Florida, and Drake University in Des Moines, Iowa.

"I chose Drake because of its academics," Kelly said. "Drake offered, and I accepted a full athletic scholarship to run for them."

At Drake, Kelly was on the 1986 Missouri Valley Conference Cross Country All-Conference Team and a 1987 MVC Indoor Track Conference Champion in the two-mile relay.

He graduated with an advertising degree from Drake in May 1988.

Kelly then completed an internship at Stafford Advertising Agency in Sioux

Falls, S.D., as a junior copy writer and returned home to Indiana.

"I moved to Seattle, Wash., from Terre Haute, Ind., in February 1990 and for 10 years managed the grassroots rock club Colourbox in Pioneer Square."

### Duluth and Minneapolis

"I moved back to the Midwest in 2004 when my late mother was diagnosed with cancer. I worked for the Home Depot in Duluth, Minn., as the department supervisor for shipping and receiving and the night manager."

Another big-box company recruited his managerial services from the Twin Cities area so Kelly left Duluth and moved to Minneapolis in 2007.

"I lived in the Minneapolis area for several years before moving to Florida in 2020," he said. "I worked as a graphic designer for Shutterfly until COVID-19."

He currently lives in Naples on the Gulf of Mexico coast and works for a company called Naples Transportation and Tours as its Segway and eBike tour guide.

"I get to design anything promotional for the different tours we offer to hand out at the storefront. I've always found jobs where eventually my artistic background comes into play."

# Tracy D. Hertsel

Tracy D. Hertsel's arrival on the Southwestern Michigan College Board of Trustees coincided with the return of intercollegiate athletics after a 25-year hiatus.

That seems fitting because he's often spotted in the 1st Source Bank Fieldhouse stands, rooting on his Roadrunners, and paces SMC Athletics' social media public engagement list week in and week out.

Hertsel, now board vice chairman, also is an avid arts supporter, most recently attending the fall band concert "Among Us" featuring living composers.

SMC's Board of Trustees unanimously appointed him trustee on March 9, 2020. A week after his appointment, SMC suspended in-person classes to deliver lessons online due to COVID 19.

The board's March 30 and April 20 meetings were canceled outright, with May 18 and June 15 sessions held by Zoom.

So Hertsel's first in-person meeting was on July 22, when the board unanimously authorized the administration to pursue the return of NJCAA men's and women's cross country in the fall of 2021.

"Sports were a big deal" when he graduated from SMC in 1983, and students often congregated in the Charles O. Zollar Building between classes. For Hertsel it was a chance to reacquaint himself with friends from other communities he met through athletics or student government.

Hertsel, who was born at Dowagiac's Lee Memorial Hospital and grew up in Vandalia—he lives at Donnell Lake—graduated from Cassopolis Ross Beatty Junior/Senior High School in 1980. His class was first to complete all four years in the new building just south of the village that is Cass County's seat.

He worked for Cassopolis Public Schools for 29 years, initially teaching middle school for six years, then working in various levels of administration, serving his final five years as superintendent.



Ironically, considering that he majored in physical education (with an economics minor) for his Western Michigan University bachelor's degree and also has a WMU master's degree in athletic administration, one position Hertsel never held was athletic director.

Hertsel was then employed at Niles Community Schools as Director of Student Support Services for four

and a half years. His responsibilities included non-certified staff, approval of salary changes/transcripts, non-traditional education, Title IX, harassment, investigations and parent and student affairs.

Thanks to the ongoing pandemic, he was pressed into service as Niles' "COVID director," tracking trends, case numbers and Gov. Gretchen Whitmer's executive orders.

Besides putting out the figurative fires he extinguished as a school

administrator, Hertsel is no stranger to dousing real blazes with what is now the Central Cass Fire Department. He has been a volunteer firefighter for 37 years.

Members of the fire department also support the community through pancake breakfasts, veterans luncheons, and project graduation celebrations, as well as driving fire trucks for local parades and celebrating state champions' returns to the community.

His civic life includes serving in many ways—on the board of the Cassopolis Public Schools Foundation, as a trustee at Michiana Church of Christ, and 20 years on the board of the Cassopolis Family Clinic Network, serving the last six years as president of the board.

He received the Honorary FFA Regional Award in 2022, the United Way of Southwest Michigan's Susan L. Dobrich Volunteer Leadership Award in 2023, and also received the VFW award for Firefighter of the Year in 2025.

Volunteering has always been important to Hertsel as he learned at a young age to admire adults who led groups such as Little League, 4-H clubs, FFA, Cub Scouts, and the Cass County Fair. He knows that the success of a rural community such as Cass County is dependent on volunteers willing to support the youth, underprivileged, elderly, and those less fortunate.

Hertsel's long involvement in the community, understanding of the K-12 education environment, and experience with collective bargaining agreements, budgets, faculty, and students have been a tremendous asset to SMC. He is also an advocate for dual enrollment and student housing.



# NEAR-FATAL CRASH LED ROADRUNNER INTO NURSING

In 1968, when Gary L. Allan, DNP, CNP, PMHNP-BC, LMFT, was 10 years old, he nearly died after being struck by a car.

"I was hospitalized for over two months and had to undergo rehabilitation," he said. "It was while I was hospitalized that I was cared for by a male student nurse. At the time I thought it was unthinkable that a man could be a nurse. However, I discovered that ability to provide nursing care to me was of a different quality as he could relate to me as a male who was sick and injured."

#### **The experience stayed with him.**

"I graduated from high school in 1976 and went to college to study to be a minister. I sensed a vocation or call to be a nurse. This is what I saw myself doing and have continued to do for the past 45 years. It is rewarding to be able to use my gifts to serve others."

In 1980, when Allan finished his associate degree in nursing at Southwestern Michigan

College, he already knew he wanted to be a nurse, perhaps to go on for further study in the field. What he did not realize is how this calling would eventually lead him to a doctorate in nursing practice.

### From New York to Florida and Elkhart

Allan grew up in western New York. When he was 16, his family relocated to Bradenton, Fla. In New York, he went to Clarence High School, finishing his junior and senior years at Manatee High School in Bradenton.

"My wife was from Elkhart," Allan said. "We moved to live near her family in Elkhart. I went to SMC because it was close to home and, as a young father, it offered the most direct route to becoming a registered nurse."

### Rigorous scholastic standards

"I chose SMC because it had much to offer. In hindsight, it was an excellent choice because it had rigorous scholastic standards. It provided a great background for someone like myself.

"I became a nurse assistant before I came to SMC. At the time they still had 'orderlies,' which I did part-time in Elkhart while attending nursing school fulltime. It was a great choice.

"Before the NCLEX-RN, there was what we called 'state boards.' My scores on the state nursing examination were among the highest in my state. This says much about the excellent education I received at SMC."

### Psychiatric-mental health nurse practitioner

Allan built on the excellent foundation SMC provided. "I went on to finish advanced education, including a B.S. from Indiana Wesleyan University (1985), an MSN from the University of South Alabama (2005), and a DNP from Valparaiso University (2012)."

As a psychiatric-mental health nurse practitioner (PMHNP) since 2009, Allan provides care similar to a psychiatrist.

"In New Mexico we have autonomous practice whereby we can have a private practice or work in an established clinic," the Rio Rancho resident said. "In addition to being a PMHNP, I also hold two master's degrees in counseling and in marriage and family therapy. I spent several years in graduate school learning to be a psychotherapist, which has enhanced my psychiatric nursing practice.

"So as part of my practice I diagnose and treat mental illnesses that range from moderate to severe. I provide medication management, but I also provide psychotherapeutic interventions that include

supportive psychotherapy, psychoeducation, and other interventions that often include case management and emergency interventions.

"Because of my vocation," he said, "I have chosen to work only for not-for-profit organizations, preferably that operate without concern for whether or not a patient can pay.

"I am independent in my provision of psychiatric care in my current setting. There are other psychiatric providers, including psychiatrists and other PMHNPs in my organization."

### His organization is an FQHC

"The organization is a Federally Qualified Health Center (FQHC). Most severe psychiatric patients are not able to work and many have profound disabilities

and scientific opportunities, and the history is fascinating."

### Overcoming psychiatry bias

"Shortly after I graduated I had a close family member develop severe mental illness," Allan said. "When I went to SMC I had a bias against psychiatry. The family illness changed all that. I had to learn. Additionally, when I graduated approximately 3 percent of nurses were male. That often limited the specializations we could take. Usually men were placed in areas that required physical strength including orthopedics, critical care and, of course, psychiatry.

"I did not anticipate going into psychiatry but was 'convinced' to go into the field due to shortages and recruiters who had several open positions. It was shortly



**"I appreciated the excellent learning I received when I was at SMC which, to this day, is the foundation of what I do and all my subsequent education."**

—GARY L. ALLAN

related to mental illness. My goal is to help them to be optimally functional and, if able, to provide the best care I can to ensure full recovery."

### Is this specialty in demand?

"This is definitely the case," Allan said. "The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) reports that employment of nurse practitioners in general is expected to grow exponentially and even more for PMHNPs as the number of qualified psychiatrists decreases.

"There are severe shortages in rural counties and critical shortages. There are expectations that there may be deficits of several thousands of PMHNPs by 2037."

### Four seasons of mild weather

Allan moved to New Mexico in 2015. "I came here because there were shortages in psychiatric providers," Allan said. "We also came because it is known as the 'Land of Enchantment.' The weather here is mild for all four seasons. The scenery is breathtaking. There is so much cultural diversity, including art, culinary excel-

after starting to work in psychiatry that I discovered that I had natural abilities to communicate with others, to understand people with mental illness, often unique ways of communicating and the use of empathy in treatment.

"I later finished a bachelor's degree, then completed two additional mental health master's degrees. I discovered that I loved mental health and felt as though I thrived in it. I can't imagine doing anything different."

### A family full of nurses

"My wife became a nurse, as well as her sister who also graduated from SMC," Allan said. "I have three adult children. My daughter is a nurse. My son is a family nurse practitioner and also graduated with his doctorate in nursing practice from Rush University. My youngest daughter works in investing. I have eight grandchildren, and so far two of them want to become nurses. Who knows? Maybe others will follow this path."

An illustration of a person in a blue hoodie and red pants with a white stripe, running on a stylized city skyline. The person is wearing blue sneakers. The background features various buildings in shades of orange, brown, and blue, with simple line-art clouds in blue and orange.

'98 GRAD  
BLENDED

# Wellness with Entrepreneurship



A  
fter earning his associate degree in marketing from Southwestern Michigan College in 1998, Matt Megyese of Phoenix, Ariz., gained experience working with a variety of companies across different roles and industries.

That journey eventually led to a long-standing career with a major insurance carrier, where he's focused on operations, innovation and strategy.

Along the way, he also completed his bachelor's degree online in business administration from Indiana University while continuing to work fulltime and launched his own business, Illuminate You Fitness, which brings together twin passions for wellness and entrepreneurship.

Megyese came to SMC from Mishawaka, where he attended Penn High School.

"I selected SMC because it was important for me to work while going to school part-time," he said. "SMC offered a small-campus feel, flexible scheduling and cost-efficient options, which mattered because I was paying for school on my own.

"At the time," Megyese said, "my focus was simply getting through college, so what came 'after' was a little blurry. But even then, I could see myself blending two things—corporate work for stability and entrepreneurial work on the side where I could take some measured risk and build something of my own.

"My plan was never a strict 'if this, then that' path. It was more about blended development—learning on the job while building formal education over time.

"I cared less about how fast I completed a program and more about building strong habits, gaining real experience and continuing to grow.

"That approach has carried through every industry I've worked in. Each role added new skills (marketing, strategy, customer experience,

leadership, innovation), and those experiences eventually led me into the insurance sector, where I'm now focused on strategy work at a major carrier."

### **Wellness and insurance**

"I did have it in the back of my mind to merge wellness and entrepreneurship, and it also developed over time," Megyese said. "Fitness has always been a meaningful part of my life.

"My wife, Kelly, and I met at a health club, and that shared passion eventually became the foundation for what we built together with Illuminate You Fitness."

He still does both insurance and fitness.

"I work fulltime as a strategist in the insurance sector," Megyese said, "and my wife and I also run Illuminate You Fitness. On top of that, I volunteer as a men's board member with a women's foundation here in Phoenix, which is a cause that means a lot to me."

### **Pre-residence halls SMC**

Megyese was a Roadrunner during the period when the residence halls were being built.

"I remember the excitement around the campus growth," he said.

"Most of our time was spent around Dowagiac and we'd occasionally take road trips to see friends at Grand Valley State University. Since I was still living at home in Mishawaka, we also spent a lot of time in the South Bend area."

Megyese has lived in several states, including Indiana, Michigan, Illinois, Alabama, and Arizona.

"Kelly and I have been in Arizona for eight years, which is the longest we've lived in one place, and we truly love it here," he said.



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**July 17, 2026  
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All proceeds benefit cancer research and the Southwestern Michigan College Steven Briegel Scholarship.

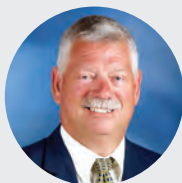
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