

Al Vos
August 13, 1943-
Years as Faculty Master: 1998-

Alvin Paul Vos was born in 1943 in the small farming community of Pella, Iowa, where he lived with his parents. He had two brothers and a sister. There Al grew up on the classic Iowa farm. His family grew corn, soybeans, hay, oats and raised cows, hogs, sheep and chickens along with other crops and livestock. It was a very diversified farm. One of Al's fondest memories from his childhood involves a team of plow horses that his father owned. At this time, agriculture in American was becoming more and more mechanized and tractors were rapidly replacing horses. Still, his father kept on a small team of plow horses which, even as a small child, Al would drive, though he likes to joke that the horses drove him more than he drove them. Today, the Vos family farm is a century farm, meaning that it has been in his family for a hundred years.¹

Al's upbringing was deeply rooted in the farming community lifestyle and agriculture. To this day, Al still enjoys gardening and plants of all kinds. Al's interest in agriculture almost prompted him to enroll in Iowa State University, which was predominantly an agricultural and tech school. However, Al wanted something more and became interested in Calvin College, a small liberal arts college in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Al was drawn to Calvin College because he had a cousin who went there who liked it. It was also a religious affiliated school which matched his denomination, but most importantly, it offered him a liberal arts education which he was more interested in than the more technical education he would have received at Iowa State University. While at Calvin College he took an English course with Stanley Wiersma, professor of English. This would be one of many English courses that Al would take with Wiersma, the man who is responsible for inspiring him to pursue a major in English. Also at Calvin College

Al began dating the woman who would be his future wife, Joyce. Al and Joyce's mothers were friends and had known each other long before either one of them were born. Al and Joyce also went to the same high school, where they were something of academic rivals. They were members of the same graduating class, and Al would be valedictorian while Joyce would be salutatorian. Both of them wound up going to Calvin College and the two would marry in 1967 and have two daughters, Miriam and Sarah.²

Al graduated from Calvin College with his BA in English and went straight to graduate school at the University of Chicago. He was inspired to do doctoral level work by his old mentor at Calvin College, Stanley Wiersma. Al was awarded his PhD in English in 1971. After receiving his doctorate he began a nation-wide job search for a teaching position. He found that position in relatively young and almost unknown university at the time called SUNY Binghamton.³

While at Binghamton Al taught courses in Shakespeare, but he began to understand his real passion when he became the Undergraduate Director in the English Department. He held this post for about twelve years and he began to learn that he really enjoyed interacting with students at a personal level. He discovered that there was so much more to a student's education than just what they learned in the classroom. Here he discovered that most of a student's life was spent outside the classroom and that their experiences beyond typical academic instruction were just as important as regular classroom instruction.⁴

When a Faculty Master position opened up he saw this as the perfect next step in his goal of becoming more student-oriented. At the time, both the Mastership positions of Newing and Hinman Colleges were open. Al chose to pursue the position in Hinman College partly because he saw it as a better fit, but also because he knew Nick Sterling, who encouraged him to apply

for the position. Al became the fifth Faculty Master of Hinman in the Fall of 1998 after the retirement of Nick Sterling in the spring of that year.⁵

Al has seen many accomplishments during his time in Hinman. Early on in his tenure as Master, Al, with the help of Donna Denoncourt (the AD of Hinman at the time), reorganized the office space of Hinman. At the time, the HCC offices were located on the second floor of the Hinman Commons building. Al and Donna moved them to their present location in the Hinman Library. This was all part of an effort to create what they liked to call a “Hinman Hub.” The idea behind the Hinman Hub was to centralize all of Hinman’s vital services into one easily accessible area. At the time the Discovery Program (which created Discovery Assistants) was relatively new, so the Hinman Library became the Hinman Library and Discovery Center, an area where Hinman students could seek out resources on academics and career options and speak with a Discovery Assistant if they had any questions related to topics in those areas. Also in this area would be the central Hinman Office and the Faculty Master’s office. The hope was that by combining all these areas together within the collegiate center it would create a magnet area for all of Hinman and not just a place but a center of activity. This action on his part helped to strengthen the Hinman collegiate center. Al was also Master when the annual Co-Rec in the Park event began. Every summer Hinman alumni from all eras journey to Central Park to socialize and to play Co-Rec football. Co-Rec in the Park started in 2001 and has been going strong every since.⁶

One of Al’s proudest achievements of his career in Hinman has been his role in the development of the Area-Based Courses (ABC Courses). Al was responsible for developing this idea. In ABC Courses students from the same residential college take the same class together in a small setting. For example, Hinman ABC Courses are only available to Hinman students. The

classes are also kept small and each class only has about 25-30 students in it. The ABC Courses have all the benefits of a small class and have the extra advantage of having the students live in close proximity to each other. For the past seven years, Al has taught the “Literacies of Power” course to Hinman College freshmen. Here Al hopes to not only give first semester freshmen a good, solid foundation to build their college careers on, but also to initiate them into Hinman College.⁷

Al’s time in Hinman also saw the establishment of a new Hinman tradition: the founding of what can only be called Hinman’s Community Anthem. It all began in the Spring of 1998. Al was the Faculty Master-designate of Hinman College and was observing and helping out with that year’s Hysteria. Unfortunately, the weather for that year was miserable. It was raining buckets and the Hinman Quad had turned into a wet, muddy mess. Events that were supposed to occur were canceled and tempers were beginning to flair. Quibbling over even the smallest of things was beginning to occur and everyone was in a generally foul mood. Eric Landau was in charge of Hysteria that year and was also the disc jockey. In an attempt to brighten everyone’s spirits and salvage what little he could of Hinman Hysteria, Eric, in a stroke of brilliance, played Billy Joel’s “Piano Man” over the speakers. For reasons that can only be called miraculous, everyone’s mood almost immediately changed and everyone ran out into the quad and began sliding in the mud like in a baseball game. This was just what that year’s Hysteria needed. It broke the tension and released some of the frustrations that everyone was feeling. It helped to alleviate some of the ill-will that had been simmering beneath the surface in each of the participants. The symbolism of the moment was not lost on Al. The time that this occurred was nearing the evening and the lyrics to the chorus, “Sing us a song, you’re the piano man/sing us a song tonight/well we’re all in the mood for a melody/And you’re got us feeling alright” reflected

exactly what everyone needed that day. This would not be the only time that “Piano Man” would be a part of a Hinman College activity. In the Fall of 2003, because of construction on the Hinman Quad, Dorm Wars was held up on Sterling Field. As it neared the evening and as everyone was milling around waiting for the judges to tally their scores and to announce who had won that year, Al took the time to tell everyone present the story of Hysteria 1998 and the significance of the song “Piano Man.” In what can only be called a perfect, picturesque Hinman moment, “Piano Man” was once again played over the speakers and everyone present formed a big circle, linked arms, sang the lyrics to the song, and swayed with the music. This author was present for that moment and recalls it as being nothing sort of a magical moment which represents exactly what the Spirit of Hinman is all about. What makes it even more amazing is that earlier in the day, Al had scampered down the steep embankment of the hill and had torn his Achilles tendon. He left Dorm Wars for a time, but returned and gave his oration in considerable pain. He even had to get crutches afterwards. This is just one of many moments which show exactly how dedicated Al has been to Hinman College. Ever since that windy, rainy and miserable day in 1998, “Piano Man” has been a staple at many Hinman functions, from Pre-services, to Dorm Wars and Hysterias, to Semi-Formals, to Hinman Commencement, almost every Hinmanite has heard that song and knows it to be Hinman College’s Community Anthem.⁸

However, like all Hinman Faculty Masters that have come before him, perhaps Al’s most long-lasting legacy is the impact that he has made upon his students. Valerie Potopsingh vividly remembers her first encounter with Al. Valerie had been elected to the position of HCC Public Affairs Vice President at the end of her freshman year and when she assumed the position Al came right up to her and hugged her, even though the two barely knew one another. Even three years after she graduated, Valerie had this to say about Al. “I still talk to him about every two

weeks. He's so involved in all of Hinman's events, not just Dorm Wars and Hysteria. Al is Mr. Hinman."⁹

Donna Lazarus also remembers the effect that Al had upon her. While she was in school, her and a friend started a mock trial club and wound up competing in New York City and in Kentucky. Al was instrumental in helping form the club and get funding from HCC for it. When they went to Kentucky to compete, they arrived at the hotel and found a package waiting there for them. It was from Al and Donna Denoncourt. That simple gesture reminded her just how much Al and the rest of Hinman cared about them.¹⁰

Michelle Grossman also recollects the profound impact that Al had on her. "Al was my mentor, especially my senior year when I really felt I could open up to him. He'll give you honest advice...Can't imagine Hinman without Al."¹¹ Similarly, Jordan Peck also has fond memories of Al, including the times when he was on the HCC E-Board and Al invited everyone over to his house where he served up some of his world-famous spiedies and pumpkin cheesecake. Jordan also remembers later on when he was President of the Student Association, the big controversial issue at the time was moving the add/drop deadline up. This would mean that students would have to add/drop a course much earlier in the semester than they previously had to. Most of the faculty were for the move and argued that it would make it easier for them, that courses would be more stable without students constantly adding or dropping the course up until midterms. Jordan sat down with Al, who like the rest of the faculty, was in favor of moving the add/drop deadline. However, instead of taking the attitude that students should just accept it for their own good, Al actually took the time to explain to Jordan why he thought it would be beneficial to students.¹² This is just one of many examples showing that Al has always had the best interest of the student at heart.

Eric Kurs-Lasky remembers one of his first college classes, the “Literacies of Power” course taught by Al Vos. He was immediately struck by the innovative approach Al took to teaching including holding classes outside, taking them on hikes to the Nature Preserve, and encouraging volunteer and community service work. He also remembers Al coming to the dining hall and having lunch with his students, something that no other professor has done. At first he was embarrassed, eating a greasy slice of pizza in front of one of his professors. Soon, however, his embarrassment faded and he became comfortable around Al. That night he excitedly called his parents and told them about this amazing professor that he had who ate lunch with his students. Eric credits Al with inspiring him to get involved in HCC and to become an RA.¹³

Joshua Kittenplan has this as his favorite memory of Al:

My favorite Al Vos memory is that he and Joyce came to my wedding, as both my wife (a Smith Hall resident from 1993-1995, and a Binghamton graduate in 1997) and I maintain contact with him (he was her faculty advisor). Al is an eternal friend, a man I admire more than most anyone I have ever met because of his passion and his ability to make so many students over these years feel as though they are his personal friend. I am honored to have been among those who welcomed him as Faculty Master, even if he was an active faculty fellow in the years before. He is also my vital connection back to Binghamton and Hinman. If Al is at an HCC meeting, it’s like nothing has changed.¹⁴

Similarly, Sharon Kowalsky has this to say about the impact that Al Vos has had on her:

When I was a pre-frosh and I was at orientation, I took a tour of Hinman because I knew that was where I was going to live. I also knew that I was going to be an English major, so when Al, who was part of the tour, mentioned that he was an English Department adviser, I sought him out to ask him questions about both Hinman and Binghamton. There was a line to talk to him, so I stood in the back and sort of listened to other people for a while before asking my question: in his experience, did a lot of people have trouble adjusting? He said that it depends on the person and that no one is comfortable at first, but after a while, Hinman starts to feel like home and college feels like a well-worn pair of shoes.

Al was always the go-to person when it came to working out problems with HPC in relation to Hinman or even as a general adviser to problems we needed to work out within the company. As a small organization, we tried to hold fast to the rules of our

constitution, even if it meant kicking out members who didn't comply with our constitution. He was always a great person to talk to when you needed advice on anything.¹⁵

Tara Stevens also has many wonderful memories of her time with Al. One of her fondest memories of her time in Hinman was when the Hinman Fellows planned a “Snow Day” program one winter. Although the turnout was relatively small, Al was present and she’ll always remember him sledding down the hill by Mountainview College and of him rolling up snow to make a snowman. She also had this to say about the relationship they had:

If I had to choose one mentor from my college years, it would undoubtedly be Al Vos. There is not enough anyone can say to capture what Al means to both Hinman and the students he takes under his wing. He seems to have boundless energy and compassion for Hinmanites and I can't adequately express his significance to my growth as a student and as a person. Al is still the first person I email when I need advice. In a world where we leave home and our parents for the first time, he is a grounding force and a constant for students who may otherwise be adrift.

Al helped me through difficult times at school; let's just say I was not always the model resident and, although I always meant well, I think I may have caused a few headaches in residential life (what do you do with a DA who gets written up before she even starts?). He helps me now as I try to determine what my life path should be and I am so grateful for his steady guidance and support. Al opens his life to his students and he makes it so easy for us to reciprocate.¹⁶

These are just a few of the many, many students over the years who have been inspired and mentored by Al Vos. Al has continued the tradition of all the previous Faculty Masters and has mentored and encouraged many of Hinman’s students to get involved in Hinman but also to strive to reach their goals and their ambitions. This author can say that beyond a doubt that of all the faculty members that are on this campus, Al Vos is the most dedicated and passionate about his work.

Students are not the only ones who have been inspired by Al. Some of his colleagues also cite their appreciation for him. Dr. Francis Newman had this to say about Al Vos.

Al comes from a very spiritual, Midwestern background. He loves being Master. He'd be a minister if he weren't a Master. He does it [the Master position] because he believes in it. Every year we ask him if he'd like to go and be a chaperone with the English Department's Semester in London Program and every year he gives an excuse about why he can't go. The real reason he doesn't do the program is because he likes being Master so much.¹⁷

Al's predecessor as Faculty Master of Hinman, Nick Sterling, also commented on Al's commitment to students and to Hinmanites.

Al has brought more academics into the residential colleges. Al was instrumental in establishing the Discovery Program at Binghamton and I think that's just a wonderful idea. I think it's great that there's more academics in the colleges because it's something that students need and Al was the driving force behind all that.¹⁸

As has been seen, Al has touched the lives of more people than he possibly could imagine. However, he has this to say about his experiences as Faculty Master of Hinman College.

Being Faculty Master has made me a heretic. What I mean by that is this: professors are supposed to believe that classroom experiences are the most important experiences a student will have while in college. Since I've become Master, I've been converted to the doctrine that more is learned outside of the classroom. So you could say that now I'm a happy heretic.¹⁹

Heretic or not, Al has contributed more than he could possibly imagine to Hinman College. Not only has he continued the great traditions passed down to him by past Faculty Masters, but he also has pioneered new and innovative ideas to bring Hinman into the New Millennium and ensure that it remains a great and vibrant community well into the future.

¹ Al Vos, interview with author, May 8, 2007.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Valerie Potopsingh, telephone conversation with author, January 25, 2007.

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- ¹⁰ Donna Lazarus, telephone conversation with author, January 26, 2007.
- ¹¹ Michelle Grossman, telephone conversation with author, March 11, 2007.
- ¹² Jordan Peck, telephone conversation with author, March 26, 2007.
- ¹³ Eric Kurs-Lasky, interview with author, February 16, 2007.
- ¹⁴ Joshua Kittenplan, e-mail message to author, February 8, 2007.
- ¹⁵ Sharon Kowalsky, e-mail message to author, February 15, 2007.
- ¹⁶ Tara Stevens, e-mail message to author, March 7, 2007.
- ¹⁷ Francis X. Newman, interview with author, November 17, 2006.
- ¹⁸ Nick Sterling, interview with author, May 9, 2007.
- ¹⁹ Al Vos, interview with author, May 8, 2007.