

# REFRESH

## ALUMNUS OF POINT LOMA AWARDS BY CHRISTINE SPICER



**Nell Becker (02) Sweeden** has learned that embracing one's calling involves a continual process of discernment throughout life. This belief has guided her through many achievements and opportunities to use her gifts to serve both God and others.

Originally a Spanish major, Becker Sweeden had a passion for theology that was awakened during her final year at PLNU. She decided to not only add theology as a double major, but to also stay at PLNU to continue with master's courses in theology under the guidance of Drs. Michael Lodahl, Herb Prince, and John Wright.

Becker Sweeden married **Josh Sweeden (03)** shortly after his graduation, and the two served as volunteer missionaries in Paraguay, teaching theology to up-and-coming local pastors.

In 2004, they both began studying at Nazarene Theological Seminary (NTS) in Kansas City. It was there that Becker Sweeden started working with Nazarene Compassionate Ministries (NCM), which focuses on global injustices and those who are the most vulnerable and marginalized in countries around the world.

After seminary, the couple began doctoral programs at Boston University together. At the same time, Becker Sweeden served as editor of *NCM Magazine* for three years. She was then presented with her next challenge: becoming the new NCM international programs coordinator. Her job was to oversee NCM's global ministry, facilitating the work of the on-the-ground coordinators in each country.

Both Sweedens completed their Ph.D.s in practical theology and were ordained in 2011. They applied jointly at George Fox Evangelical Seminary in Portland, Ore., to fill the Wesleyan theology chair there. From 2013 to 2016, they each taught master's students and doctor of ministry students in church history and theology.

"My practical theology research was about how hospitality practices are challenged by transnational migrations," Becker Sweeden said. "I looked at how the church responds to people who pass through or come into community and how communities of faith live out compassion in their contexts."

In 2016, Becker Sweeden was offered a new opportunity to live out her calling. She was invited back to NCM as its full-time director. Though the Sweedens were enjoying teaching, Becker Sweeden saw the director role as one where her unique combination of gifts and experiences could be of real value.

"NCM is embedded within the Church of the Nazarene," she explained. "Having seminary training as well as a theological lens for how ministry arises in and through the local church in its context will be key. I have a passion for seeing the lived theologies of the Majority World [also known as the developing nations] come to the forefront, with intentions to not focus just in the U.S. or just in one area. I'm thankful for how my heart for service was nurtured in me during my time at PLNU."

While Becker Sweeden will lead NCM, Sweeden will be the new academic dean at NTS. They have two children, Eli, 4, and Asher, 1.



It's not uncommon for people to stop **Polly (Ghormley) (79) Gumm** on the streets of Billings, Mon. Sometimes they haven't seen her in a decade or two, but they are compelled to reintroduce themselves. One even named a cow after her. After all, Gumm helped deliver their baby.

Gumm was inspired by her mother to become the first person in her family to attend college and to become a nurse. While raising five children and working, Gumm's mother earned her GED and studied to become an LPN (licensed practical nurse).

Gumm graduated in 1979 with a degree in nursing from PLNU and worked in the Hoag Hospital newborn nursery in Newport Beach. In 1983, she married **David Gumm (77)** and moved to Lubbock, Texas, where David was in a doctoral program. Over the next few years, Polly and David moved to Wichita, Kan; Sacramento, Calif.; and Dallas, Texas, before settling in Billings in 1991. Along the way, they had three children: David, Andrew, and SarahBeth.

Spending most of her career in labor and delivery, Gumm rejoiced with countless families who welcomed healthy babies into this world. But she also developed a special calling to the parents of babies who didn't survive.

Gumm's ministry to bereaved parents began early in her career when she was present for the birth of a baby born with anencephaly. Knowing the baby wouldn't survive, the mother didn't want to see him, and the doctor instructed Gumm to leave him in a back room.

"I just could not abide that anyone would put a baby in a back room to die," she said.

So Gumm broke the rules and took the baby's measurements, made a card with his footprint, and rocked him until his short life was over. The next day, she ran into the father in the hallway. He asked her if she had seen his child, and she shared what she knew.

"When I handed him the footprint card, it was like handing him the world," Gumm said.

For Gumm, coming alongside people experiencing deep grief was never a burden.

"The veil between Heaven and Earth is so thin," she said. "I've seen it; I could almost touch it. I haven't done anything extraordinary. I just did what was right."

Recently, Gumm sensed it was time to move on from labor and delivery to give the younger nurses at the hospital a chance to advance. Now, Gumm is the nurse for a Native American health clinic and is on staff at an aesthetic medicine practice. She also still gives talks and mentors labor and delivery nurses.

So many are grateful for Polly Gumm, and she is grateful, too.

"I could walk confidently knowing where those babies were going," she said.



**Richard Jeffrey ("Jeff") Conner (84), M.D., F.A.C.S.**, has two priorities that drive his life: faith and family.

"No matter what people do in life, the ultimate goal is to honor God," Conner said. "It's easy to get distracted, but that should really be our focus."

Conner and his wife, **Shelly (Jones) (84)**, met their freshman year at PLNU.

"We met in Biology 100, and I tell people it has been chemistry ever since," he laughed.

The Conners both graduated in 1984, he with a major in biology/chemistry and she with her BSN. He went on to earn his M.D. from Saint Louis University School of Medicine in 1988 before completing his internship and residency at the Naval Medical Center in San Diego. In 1998, he entered private practice at Tri Valley Urology Medical Group, where he is currently a partner.

Throughout his medical career, Conner has earned many honors and awards. He is currently serving as an associate professor of urology at UCSD Medical Center. In the past, Conner served as chief of staff and on the governing board at Loma Linda University Medical Center in Murrieta, Calif. He was instrumental in bringing a da Vinci Robot to Loma Linda University Medical Center-Murrieta, increasing the quality of care for patients and allowing many procedures to be done laparoscopically.

Meanwhile, the Conners have raised four children: **Shannon (08)**, Cory, Samantha, and David. The couple adopted Samantha and David when the children were five and seven years old, a process Jeff called "the difficult but most rewarding thing we have done." The Conners currently have one grandchild and twins on the way.

In addition to honoring God with excellence in his profession and love for his family, Conner has used his abilities to meet the needs of people with limited access to medical care in Northeast India for the past 17 years. During approximately 20 trips to India, he has worked with local doctors, performed surgery, and shared the Gospel. Because of his medical work, he has been able to share his faith in places where it would otherwise not be possible to do so. All the care Conner and his teams provide is done as a free gift to the people.

"It's showing them the love of Christ by meeting their physical needs," Conner explained.

To support the mission work, Conner co-founded and is president of Collaborative Development International, a nonprofit organization.

The Conners are active members of Temecula Hills Christian Fellowship, and their executive pastor, Rob Poster, sums up how so many feel about Jeff: "[He is] an individual who strives to use what God has given him to be a blessing to others in his family, local community, and the world."



**Kim (Berry) (90) Jones** has always put her faith into action. The details of her day-to-day have changed, but her desire to live a life of substance has never wavered.

Post-college, Jones married her husband, Chris, and earned a position as director of marketing for Sharp Healthcare. After her son, Zach, was born, she established

Canopy Marketing. When Zach and his sister, Brooke, born three years later, were very young, Kim ran Canopy Marketing as a part-time job. In the last 10 years, it has grown into full-time work. For many years, she volunteered at her kids' schools, at Journey Community Church, and with PLNU's Alumni in Business Auxiliary as a leader and mentor to students.

Then about four years ago, Jones attended Donald Miller's Storyline Conference at PLNU where she heard Bob Goff, author and founder of *Love Does*, speak for the first time.

"I walked away feeling a big shift in my life," Jones said. "I tell people it was like changing lanes."

Jones had always been drawn to serving people who were marginalized. However, she now felt a more specific calling to survivors of human trafficking. First, she began volunteering with Generate Hope, a nonprofit organization that provides housing, therapy, and education to trafficked women in San Diego.

Jones soon also connected with Dr. Jamie Gates, director of PLNU's Center for Justice and Reconciliation (CJR) as well as co-chair for research and data of the San Diego Regional Human Trafficking and the CSEC (Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children) Advisory Council.

"He was just starting to dream about a scholarship for survivors of trafficking," Jones said. "For most survivors, college seems impossible. Many are suffering from PTSD and come from a background of poverty. But this was where PLNU could put a stake in the ground and do something to help. Jamie empowered me to join what was happening."

Thrilled that her alma mater cared about human trafficking as much as she did, Jones jumped in with both feet, leading the crowdfunding campaign to get the scholarship off the ground and offering her marketing skills pro bono. Currently, the Beauty for Ashes Fund is supporting four students who are survivors of trafficking.

Jones has also now joined the CJR as program director, focusing on external relations development, while still maintaining her marketing firm.

"The absolute most meaningful thing to me is sitting in a room with the current students [who have received the Beauty for Ashes Scholarship]," Jones said. "I know their stories and what happened to them, and I am watching how PLNU is changing their present and their futures. They all say how cared about and loved they feel. For most survivors, there has never been anything that didn't have a catch to it. It's been interesting to watch them grapple with this — that this is a gift to them."