Alumni Profile

Story to Tell

By Heidler Vasker Plaat

Brian Gibbs ’84 believes everyone has a story to tell. It’s an observation he first made in a large bookstore in Hamburg, Germany, more than 25 years ago. “I was a Hope junior, employed at the shop during a week-long program. It wasn’t long before Gibbs learned that three elder coworkers had fought in World War II. “We had discussions every day at lunch,” he recalled. “They took great interest in me as a 19-year-old American student, and, since I was interested in European history and had proficiency in German, we were intent on sharing their wartime experiences with me.”

“I remember thinking then that you only have to ask one or two questions, and they're often eager to tell you their life stories.” Many years have passed since those luncheon conversations, but the insight Gibbs gained has shaped his life significantly. He enjoys developing relationships with those he meets, and he’s experienced first-hand how a foreign language enables one to get to know other cultures and people.

For most of the nearly 25 years since Gibbs graduated from Hope, he has lived in Europe. His wife, Barbara, is Austrian, and their three children – Anna, Emily and Liam – are dual Austrian-American citizens. The family lives in the city of Bad Homburg, near Frankfurt. Since 1990, Gibbs has worked at PRTM Management Consultants, a global firm that helps technology-based companies better compete in the international marketplace. He helped establish the firm’s office in Germany and became a director in 1996. He typically travels four days a week throughout Europe and beyond to support the firm’s clients.

“There’s been tremendous variety over the years – I’m always working with new people, new companies and on new problems that need solutions,” he said. “No project is quite like one I’ve done before because each company’s situation, company and country culture and specific needs are different.”

Gibbs’ path to living and working overseas began early. While in high school in Union Springs, N.Y., he studied German and participated in an exchange visit in Germany, which sparked his interest. Another interest – economics – prompted him to pursue a major in business administration when he entered Hope. Because Gibbs had to complete a language requirement, he enrolled in a German class with now-retired professor Dr. Gisela Strand. As each semester passed, she convinced Gibbs to keep studying the language, and, eventually, persuaded him to spend his junior year in Germany, a decision enthusiastically supported by Professor of Economics Dr. Robin Ely, Gibbs’ faculty advisor. During his year abroad, Gibbs experienced student and cultural life in two university cities – Hamburg and Freiburg.

“What I liked about my time at Hope was that it was discover as you go,” Gibbs said. “I was able to follow my interests in economics and management. And, because of his desire to study overseas, in addition to his original business major Gibbs completed majors in German and international studies: “One gave me the means to access a culture and the other gave me the context to understand cultures.”

As graduation approached, Gibbs applied for a fullbright teaching position in Austria on the encouragement of the late Dr. Paul Fried ’46, who had established the college’s Vienna Summer School Program in 1956. Gibbs was posted to Scharding, where he taught for two years. During the summers, he joined the Vienna Summer School as an assistant to Dr. Stephen Hemenway; who had had Gibbs in his freshman English course.

Gibbs returned to the U.S. to attend the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University, where he earned his master’s degree with a specialization in international business policy and technology management. Following an internship in the Economics Section at the U.S. Consulate in Hamburg, he joined PRTM and soon returned to Europe. He has since lived an international life ever since. Throughout the past 25 years, Gibbs has maintained very close ties with Hope College, particularly with Dr. Hemenway and the Vienna Summer School. In the early ’90s, he taught an economics course for the program for three years. In addition, in all but two years since he graduated from Hope, Gibbs (along with his wife and children in more recent years – they’re pictured on page three) has flown to Vienna each summer to join Dr. Hemenway and the students on the overnight Alpine hiking trip. During the excursions, Gibbs addresses the students as part of their “Value in Travel” Senior Seminar.

“Brian really reaches the students in terms of talking about the decisions that he has made on his own life,” said Dr. Hemenway. “He always brings some originality, creativity and a new approach to his address.”

In addition to establishing a scholarship for the Vienna Summer School, Gibbs and his family have supported other Hope programs. For the past several years, Gibbs has traveled to the U.S. to meet with retired economics professor Dr Jim Heisler and Professor of Management Dr. Tom Smith and to host the Hope London May Term students for dinner and a senior seminar discussion. This summer, he welcomed the touring Hope women’s basketball team to Frankfurt and arranged for them to perform a service project at the international Anglican/Episcopal church (where Gibbs serves as Senior Warden), followed by a barbeque at his family’s home. In the fall of 2005, Gibbs made a special trip to Hope from Germany to be a guest speaker at the dedication of the Martha Miller Center for Global Communication. The family has also supported the Baket Scholar Program in various ways.

“It’s been extremely satisfying to have had so much contact with Hope faculty and hundreds of Hope students over the years, even though I live so far away,” Gibbs said. “Several faculty members have become family friends, and I enjoy the opportunities to encourage students to experience life outside of the U.S. and to learn a second language. I believe it is fundamental that students spend time abroad regardless of their major because it gives them new perspectives, valuable skills and an awareness that they otherwise wouldn’t have. These are all vitally important in our age of globalization.”

Because his life has been shaped by Hope professors who took the time to share their life stories and encourage him along the way, Gibbs believes it is important to do the same for current students. One word of advice he often gives them is to “get comfortable not knowing” what their future might hold.

“I tell them to leave room open for discovery and adventure,” he said, “and they may end up somewhere doing something they never thought possible, living an enormously fascinating and enriching life.”

Then, too, can share their stories with others.

Given the importance of his own study-abroad experience, Brian Gibbs ’84 has stayed actively engaged with the college as a resource and even host for Hope programs in Europe, where he has lived for most of the years since graduation. He is pictured at center back with participants in the college’s London May Term this past summer.

“Every day is different for Brian Gibbs ’84 as he travels throughout Europe and beyond through his work with PRTM Management Consultants, putting his majors in German, international studies and business administration to good use.

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