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VAN AUKEN

Ph.D.

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AUL VAN AUKEN WAS BORN IN MASON CITY, IOWA, but when he started talking, it wasn't in English. Van Auken lived in Norway, his mother's native country, for one year as a toddler. Although he still retains some of the language, his immersion in the Norwegian culture, rather than the dialect, made the most lasting impression on him. "We were fortunate enough to spend quite a bit of time there growing up," Van Auken said, "which allowed me to experience a different culture in a meaningful way."

His parents, both teachers, Van Auken and his family traveled to Norway almost every summer to spend time at his grandparents' cabin. He and his sister and cousins ran free, fishing on the rowboat, hiking

in the mountains and living simply. “[It] helped not only further my love for nature, but also let me see that there are other systems that work, other ways of doing things,” he said.

Now, as an associate professor for the Sociology Department and Environmental Studies Program at the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh and current Sociology Department Chair, Van Auken teaches about some of the values he learned in rural Norway.

“The Norwegian culture is really humble and low key,” he said. “If they’re rich, they don’t flaunt it with fancy cars or moving to gated communities. This is some of what I believe in most, being critical about levels of consumption and materialism. It helps explain why I am into sociology.”

Van Auken credits his parents for raising him in a way that further instilled in him a passion for sociology. “They are politically progressive, widely engaged in the community, open-minded, enjoy debate, discussion and hanging out with all kinds of people, and are very committed to things like multiculturalism.”

After graduating from Forest City High School (Forest City, Iowa) in 1991, Van Auken only took one sociology course in college, but he was well on his way to finding the subjects he loved the most.

Building Communities

Van Auken studied at Waldorf College, a small private college in Forest City, where his parents both taught, before finishing his business degree in business administration marketing at Wartburg College in 1995. He further developed his interest in sociology by being involved in student government and social justice organizations as an undergraduate.

In the fall of 1995, Van Auken entered the Lutheran Volunteer Corps in Delaware, where he lived in a simple, intentional community with other volunteers. “When you live with other volunteers, you go out of your way to do things together and live simply,” he said. “We got paid very little money; it forced us to do creative things to have fun.”

Through the program, Van Auken volunteered for the Food Bank of Delaware, for which he helped manage food programs and assisted in the coordination of the organization’s work with food pantries throughout the state. “I basically did community

Q&A with Paul Van Auken



WHAT IS THE VALUE OF A LIBERAL ARTS EDUCATION?

Liberal arts education is critical to the growth and development of our youth and the future of democracy and life on the planet. This may sound like hyperbole, but I believe it. Quality education is about being exposed to new information, new types of people, different ways of looking at the world, different approaches to life, and learning to think critically and understand how everything fits together. The result is better informed people and perhaps more importantly, people who think for themselves, are open-minded, curious, and appreciative of diversity in its various forms. Such people are more likely to be engaged in the world around them and committed to trying to make it better, whether via the economy, our educational system, the arts, or our relationship with the environment.

WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE YOUR 18-YEAR-OLD SELF?

I don’t have too many regrets. But I guess I’d say, take risks, don’t be a jerk; go out of your way to get involved and get to know people who are different than you; be bold in standing up for what is right; play music, get out into the woods, eat good food and drink good beer, and travel as much as you can; and savor the time you have with your family and friends, as you won’t be able to predict how long it will last.

WHAT IS THE VALUE OF TEACHING AND DOING RESEARCH AT THE SAME TIME?

Teaching and research are mutually reinforcing. Research inevitably produces interesting real-life examples for teaching, about how concepts come to life through practical application, about the challenges with and benefits from various methodological approaches, and in general, how the world works. As we teach, we learn. Teaching also provides the opportunity to disseminate and receive feedback about our own research and can lead directly to conceptual ideas and the genesis of new research projects- I have examples of both.

WHAT BOOKS DO YOU HAVE ON YOUR SHELVES AT HOME THAT PEOPLE WOULD BE SURPRISED ABOUT?

I don't know if anyone would be surprised, because I doubt many people are wondering about the content of my bookshelves :, but I'd say ?uestlove's recent autobiography. My favorite genre for pleasure reading is autobiographies and biographies about musicians and music.

WHAT IS ONE OF YOUR MOST MEMORABLE TEACHING EXPERIENCES?

What comes immediately to mind are the two opportunities I had to team teach a documentary filmmaking class with Troy Perkins from the Radio/TV/Film department. We put our heads together, and asked film students to put their heads together with sociology, environmental studies, women's studies, African American studies, and other students to make films about social issues. It was challenging, but really interesting and fun, and the students made some really good short films.

WHAT RESEARCH ARE YOU WORKING ON THESE DAYS?

Since I came to UWO in 2007, I've been working on a couple different areas of scholarship. The first is an ongoing effort to more clearly conceptualize the concept of community, something that has been of interest to sociologists since the dawn of the discipline, but which

continues to be used in a variety of ways, making what I consider a very important idea a fuzzy one in theory and practice. Not only have I been engaged in projects designed to better understand the concept as I conduct case studies of people in places that are sociologically interesting in various ways, I also focus upon how these people and places are shaped by and shape their surrounding environment and argue that this is key to the process of community, something that is not widely acknowledged by existing scholarship about community, but which I see as a clear link between sociology and environmental, and also critical to achieving sustainability (another term that is used in many ways and often without a great deal of clarity). Issues related to inclusion/exclusion and access to natural resources are a common thread. Within this general framework I've done a cross-national (involving an area of Northern Wisconsin and two neighboring island municipalities in Norway) comparative study of areas experiencing change due to tourists and second-home owners increasingly coming to enjoy their natural beauty; have studied the development of identified neighborhoods (an ongoing project) and a community planning process in Oshkosh; helped a rural WI town conduct research about their community and environment for a visioning process; and am studying the relationship of Hmong people to the Fox River in the Fox Valley and the social dynamics around the land-use anomaly that is the Geneva Lake Shore Path in Southeastern Wisconsin. As I've gone along, I've also written about the participatory research method that I call participant-driven photo elicitation, through which people take photographs of things/places of interest to the topic and then we (my student research assistants and me) interview them about the photographs. Finally, I have gotten involved with the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) and have conducted research about the link between level of student engagement and their learning in my classes, and with an interdisciplinary team from this campus have studied a group of other professors as they worked to implement high impact practices around increasing social inclusion in the classroom.

development because people who got the food had to belong to a group and implement programming to do it; they were trying to build a community.”

Working in community development inspired Van Auken to pursue a master’s degree in urban affairs and public policy from the University of Delaware. As a graduate student, he worked for nonprofit entities doing community development work as part of a research internship.

After earning his master’s in 1999, Van Auken did community economic development for four years for a statewide, rural-focused nonprofit in Madison, Wis.

“I enjoyed this work, which involved things like using data about poverty to make the case to grantors that we should get funding, then working with communities to fund small business development, job creation and affordable housing,” he said. “A lot of it was sociology in action ... though I wasn’t necessarily thinking about it that way at the time.”

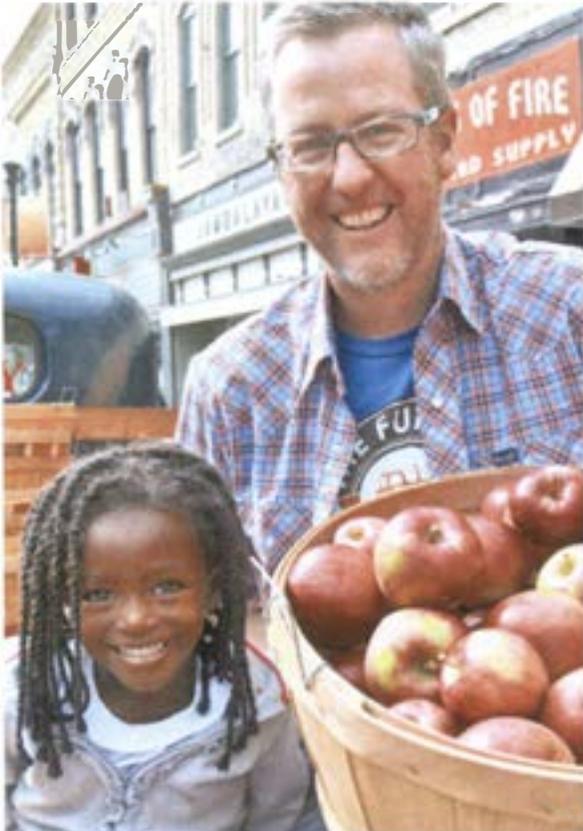
Van Auken also hadn’t been thinking about teaching, until he got an opportunity to teach entrepreneurial development courses as part of his job. “I discovered that my true calling was to be a teacher, something I think I had known deep down for a long time.”

Surrounded by one of the best graduate sociology programs in the country, Van Auken began working on his Ph.D. in sociology and rural sociology at UW-Madison in 2003. “It all aligned because had I not gotten the funding from the professor I worked for, or had I not been accepted, I don’t know what I would have ended up doing because I didn’t apply anywhere else,” he said.

Passing It On

Van Auken married his wife, Courtney, in 2004, and finished his Ph.D. in 2007. Having taught two classes at UW Oshkosh as a graduate student, Van Auken had his foot in the door and was hired as a tenure-track assistant professor in the Sociology Department and with an appointment in the Environmental Studies Program at UWO in fall 2007, starting the job two weeks after defending his dissertation. He earned tenure and promotion in 2013.

“I took a roundabout way to the field and to Oshkosh, but the field of sociology was a natural fit for me, as someone curious about how the world really works and interested in trying to make it a bit better if possible,” Van Auken said. “Being a professor of sociology and



Paul Van Auken and his daughter Soliana at the Oshkosh Saturday Farmer's Market



Paul Van Auken and his wife, Courtney, and their daughters Soliana, 3, and Tizita, 8.

environmental studies, being able to help open students' minds and learn more about themselves and their world at a place like UWO is a dream job for me."

While teaching about the subjects he is most passionate about, Van Auken still holds community development as a high priority. "[I feel] that professors at a public university like ours should try to make a positive impact upon the people of the state," he said.

Van Auken is involved with his students' successes inside and outside of the classroom, just as much as he is involved helping to create a successful local community. "I think the facilitation of discussion, learning and action should apply beyond the classroom walls, too, which is why I try to engage as much as possible with what we call public sociology," he said. "[I write] regularly for Oshkosh Independent (a local online newspaper) and do research projects around issues relevant to people of this area."

Around the time Van Auken started teaching at Oshkosh in 2007, he and his wife began the process of international adoption. They have now adopted two girls from Ethiopia, Tizita, 8, and Soliana, who will soon be 4. "Adoption is a very complex thing, but to put it simply, we wanted a family and we figured finding kids that needed one too would be a good way for us to go

about it," Van Auken said. "We're blessed to have these two daughters and sure do love them."

From growing up in two different cultures, to teaching and writing about community, environmental and social issues, to raising a multicultural family, Van Auken continues to try to make the world he lives in a better place.

"[My life] has been consistent with the basic foundation of trying to love your neighbor no matter what, to work for social justice and appreciate and take care of the earth," he said. "Not that I've ever lived up to these ideals, but it's the curiosity about the world around me and the drive to better understand it and try to make it better that help explain why I love the practice of sociology and being in my position."

Van Auken hopes to pass this critical way of thinking and acting, as a world citizen, onto his students.

"I hope my students ... start to better understand and continue to ask questions about how the world really works, how the individual fits into and is affected by their society and vice versa," he said. "[I hope] they go forward as more curious, open-minded, critical-thinking, engaged citizens, and that they care about the health of the land and believe they can make positive changes."