

Steven Grudda '10

There's an old saying that one does not visit Africa and walk away the same. The sights and sounds, the people and the pace of life differ so significantly from the West that one cannot help but be changed. For Steven Grudda, a 2010 Houghton graduate, that saying is all too true, and it transformed the course of his career and his life.

Steve was highly involved in campus life at Houghton, serving in such leadership roles as resident assistant, class president, and co-resident director. Such positions gave him valuable experience in implementing ideas while being sensitive to the needs of everyone involved. With majors in international relations and French, Steve developed a global perspective, a view that he nurtured further when he travelled with Dr. Ron Oakerson and two other students to Sierra Leone to complete a research project on mango farmers and how to include them more effectively in business supply chains. This research was later presented to World Hope International. After graduating, Steve returned to Sierra Leone to serve as the coordinator for the Mango Out-Growers Project, an agribusiness program of World Hope that connects mango farmers with village co-ops and the Africa Felix Juice company to buy and transport mangoes to global clients. The project came to the attention of former British Prime Minister Tony Blair, who visited the juice factory and met with Steve to get more acquainted with the program.

Dr. Ron Oakerson, who supervised that initial research team, praises Steve's motivation to return to Sierra Leone and implement the group's project, remarking that "I have never met anyone better suited for development work in

West Africa.” Oakerson tells the story about the time when the research group was invited to attend a high-level symposium with local and national government officials. During breakout sessions at the end of the second day, Steve was in a group with the Deputy Minister of Local Government. At the end of the session, it was Steve who had been elected to give the report about his group’s discussion to the entire conference. There was Steve, a college senior, discussing the subject of decentralization with high-level officials – including members of the presidential cabinet of Sierra Leone.

After the Mango Out-Growers project, Steve went on to serve as a Special Economic Zone Operations Manager with First Step Inc., a World Hope program that aids in encouraging economic growth. His next move was to Africa Felix Juice Company as chief operations officer, overseeing operations that affected the employment of farmers who supplied mangoes and pineapples. Steve currently works with Endsight Consulting as an African agribusiness lead associate.

In 2015 Steve was named the inaugural recipient of the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities’ Young Alumni Award. President Mullen noted that Steve “embodies all that we at Houghton hope for in our graduates: a commitment to use his God-given gifts creatively and courageously to advance God’s loving, just and redemptive purposes in our world.”

During his time in Sierra Leone, Steve became something of a local celebrity because of his athletic abilities. Little did Steve know that his time on the soccer team here at Houghton would help prepare him for a leadership role playing professional soccer in Sierra Leone, where he could model his Christian beliefs and share his faith. Wesley Dean, another 2010 graduate and a member of that

original research group, witnessed Steve's local celebrity status firsthand. When Wes borrowed Steve's motorcycle and helmet, he was greeted with waves and smiles because the locals thought it was Steve, the soccer player/business negotiator, who was riding by. The student-athlete combination helped Steve gain recognition and earn trust in the local community, and he used his reputation and development skills to successfully work with local farmers and officials, and later to manage larger enterprises like Africa Felix Juice. His friend Wes praises Steve's Christian character and his ability to "continually learn in ever-changing contexts." According to Wes, "Steve has always been deeply committed to following Christ and being the best that he could be with whatever he was doing."

Steve's successful development work in West Africa has helped provide opportunities for farmers to earn incomes and support their families, and for local cooperatives to thrive. Not only has World Hope International and the government of Sierra Leone benefitted from his dedication, but so also have the communities and individuals with whom he has worked. So today, we recognize Steve Grudda's outstanding work with the Young Alumnus of the Year award. Congratulations, Steve.