



Mark ten Haaf, '15, thrived in the Classics Department, learning five languages and tutoring students despite juggling a busy personal life
photo by Bernadine Carey-Tucker

Construction to Classics

Family man turned student pursues linguistic passion

by Matthew Makowski

Take a deep breath and imagine a life filled to capacity by attending school full time, studying five languages, tutoring, raising three kids under 10 years old, managing a photography business and working construction.

While this list may seem daunting to some, it's status quo for Mark ten Haaf, '15, who has been labeled an all-star student by faculty members in the Classics Department.

As a first-generation college student, ten Haaf always had aspirations to pursue higher education. That was put on hold when he started working for his father's construction company, AAA Poured Wall, during high school.

"I had notions of going back to school at some point, but I really enjoyed working construction in the summer," ten Haaf said.

ten Haaf, who lives in Kentwood with his children and wife, began taking night classes at Grand Rapids Community College in 2009. Three years later, ten Haaf began working part time for his family's business in order to attend school full time at Grand Valley.

"I tried to cram as many classes as possible into the first few days of the week so I could still work later in the week, at night, and on some weekends," ten Haaf said. Aside from "living in the library," most of his work, both for school and for his family's photography business, is completed at night after his kids go to bed.

Originally working toward attending seminary school and fulfilling necessary academic requirements in Greek, Hebrew and Latin linguistics, ten Haaf admits he "kind of stumbled" into the field of Classics.

"In the first year here, just beginning with Greek and Latin, I really became enamored with the study of the languages themselves," he said. "Language is the seed of all human thought so I've always considered it to have a really high place."

Fast forward three years and Hebrew, German and French now sit alongside Greek and Latin on ten Haaf's linguistics resume. ten Haaf said his love for Classics is rooted in the rich historical texts he studies that are still applicable in the world today.

"It's a huge collection of the finest thoughts from antiquity until now on the really important human issues," ten Haaf said.

"Why do bad things happen to seemingly good people? What are Gods' feelings towards us? These questions are always going to be relevant. Material that eloquently and artfully addresses all of these issues is a real treasure I hope we never lose."

As if studying five languages wasn't enough, ten Haaf was also a dedicated tutor at Grand Valley.

Throughout the latter part of his academic career at Grand Valley, ten Haaf collaborated closely with Peter Anderson, chair of the Classics Department, on his

capstone research. Following months of intense work, ten Haaf had the opportunity to present his undergraduate research during a scholarly panel at the Classical Association of the Middle West and South conference in Fredericksburg, Virginia, in October. This is an opportunity more commonly granted to graduate students and professional scholars.

"Mark found something that filled a real intellectual passion, and that's not something that happens everywhere and for every student," Anderson said. "He is a credit to the kind of overall human that Grand Valley is interested in putting out into the workforce. He's good at giving advice, people look up to him and he handles all that with a real sense of maturity, but also with humbleness."

ten Haaf attributes much of his success to the motivation he gets from his family's encouragement.

"My wife and children make enormous sacrifices, financially and in time that could be spent together," ten Haaf said. "If I were to do things at half-throttle, I'd be making a statement about the value of the time and resources that were

sacrificed. I owe it to them to perform with excellence since this is my job right now."

Being raised by a father who believed in the value of completing tasks to the utmost of one's abilities also instilled in ten Haaf a work ethic that transcends most.

"One thing I always keep in my mind is a verse in Ecclesiastes that says, 'Whatsoever the hand findeth to do, do it with all thy might,'" ten Haaf said. "I feel obligated with whatever I'm undertaking to do it well, do it perfectly, do it absolutely as well as I can, and I've tried to do that with all of my classes."

"He is a credit to the kind of overall human that Grand Valley is interested in putting out into the workforce."

- Peter Anderson