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UNION GRADUATES TURN THEIR PASSION INTO PURPOSE

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Stephanie and Andrew Larson and their children, Andrew (AJ), 13; Scott, 11; and Emily, 8, during their summer vacation in Montana.

Faith, family, and community

Andrew and Stephanie Larson practice servant leadership learned at Union

by Lauren Bongard '04

Andrew Larson '04 knew as early as fifth grade that he wanted to be a therapist.

"People just wanted to talk to me, and I cared about people," he said. Despite understanding this, he struggled to focus on his future like so many young people do. "I knew I should go to college, but as a teenager I just wanted to play basketball. Sports were where I felt the most confident."

He found a way to combine fun and his future while serving as a captain on Union's basketball team. "Playing sports at Union gave me the opportunity to be a leader," he said. "I knew I had to be vocal in a kind and compassionate way, and that's the same leadership muscle I use in the workplace. Work relationships are similar — we're teammates. Basketball might be just a game, but it was the catalyst that made me continue in my education and leadership."

Andrew left Union with a degree in psychology, armed with the skills he needed to devote his life to helping others. What he didn't expect was to become a business owner.

"Luckily for him, he married a business major," jokes his wife, Stephanie Vercio Larson '04, who helps him run his clinic.

After graduating from college and getting married, the Larsons moved to Hutchinson, Minnesota. Andrew completed his master's degree in marriage and family therapy and served at Maplewood Academy before going into private practice.

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>
> *– Dr. Andrew Larson, Union Alum*

While he loved his work, he encountered the reality that some clinic settings fell short of his vision for quality patient care and meaningful support for therapists.

In 2012, he founded NorthStar Counseling Services to help address this gap. He leaned into his values and shaped a positive, collaborative environment where he and other therapists could care for clients and themselves.

Soon, his clinic was thriving — and running out of space. Unable to find the right building for their needs, the Larsons bought property in 2019 and started designing their new clinic.

And then, along with the rest of the world, the pandemic changed the landscape for all aspects of building a business. Therapists were essential workers, but they had to shift to telehealth. That meant extra training, revamping policies and procedures, and a lot of sanitizing. Meanwhile, the construction project and social upheaval added personal and professional stress.

"We were taxed to the point of breaking," Andrew said. "We were providing support to our patients and our community, but I was never home. I had to leave Stephanie with all three kids from 6:30 in the morning until 11 or 12 at night. She was home, teaching online schooling, and we were building our new offices. In the chaos, we kept saying, 'God, You have to know what You're doing.' Looking back, we can see how it solidified the relevance of our faith and family. It definitely grew us."

Local listeners and leaders

The new clinic opened in February 2021. The facility has ample office space for the nine current providers and is a safe space for patients and therapists alike. The Larsons have carefully curated a like-minded team and strive every day to foster a work environment that's supportive and enriching.

"For us, this is servant leadership," Andrew said. "Every Wednesday, my two boys and I are in the office, cleaning the bathrooms. This is a family-owned business, and that's what we do. There's a great humility and great honor in being able to serve your community. There's no calling higher than serving each other, and we're teaching our children what it means to help others."

People have noticed that attitude of service, which has meant big things for their practice. "Since Andrew was an intern, he's had a waiting list to see him," Stephanie said. "That's the first thing about entrepreneurship. You have to have a good product. Andrew is gifted in his field, and he's truly able to help people."

He's also surrounded himself with other professionals who have similar goals but use diverse methods. "We're accepting of new people and different services," he said. "There's a security in being accepting of differences. If you approach it with curiosity, you'll find that every provider has a seat at the table. Having different perspectives in race, religion, ethnicity, backgrounds, and socioeconomic status lets us help a wider variety of patients."

Individuals, families, educators, social workers and local organizations recognize NorthStar as the first place to call when they need help. As one of the few locally owned counseling centers in the area that's not run by a corporation, NorthStar has built a reputation for serving the community. This means that while other medical centers and therapists focus on numbers, NorthStar is focused on helping people.

Being in a servant leadership position in their business and community has given the Larsons a different perspective on their time at Union.





The Larsons designed their new NorthStar Counseling Services building to feel welcoming and comforting to clients and therapists alike.

"The environment in our business is very similar to what we experienced at Union," Stephanie said. "Our teachers were giving, team-oriented, and sharp, but never competitive. They were team players and loved what they were called to do. We chose to go to Union because we liked that family atmosphere and closeness, and we've chosen to run our business that way too."

Andrew agrees, remembering how he always felt cared for at Union. "The Hardts, the Foggs, Pastor Rich, Ric Spaulding, our professors — there were so many people who gave so much," he said. "It was their career, their life, their time and energy. This amazing example of service has translated to our workplace. Our time at Union was so beneficial and affirming in our trajectory in life."

photos: courtesy of the Larson family