

For 24 years, students with a special link to their countrymen's past have been forging a future at the University of Oklahoma.

Connecting with Scandinavia

BY LYNETTE LOBBAN

In 1963 two friends got together over a cup of coffee in Greenwich Village to discuss sending a long-overdue thank-you gift. The recipient of their appreciation was the bloc of four Scandinavian countries whose citizens had risked their own lives saving those of thousands of Jews during Hitler's terrible "final solution." The thank-you co-conspirators, classical pianist and humorist Victor Borge and New York attorney Richard Netter, decided the best memorial to the heroic actions of Scandinavians of the past would have to be something of lasting value to Scandinavians of the future. Obviously flowers would not do.

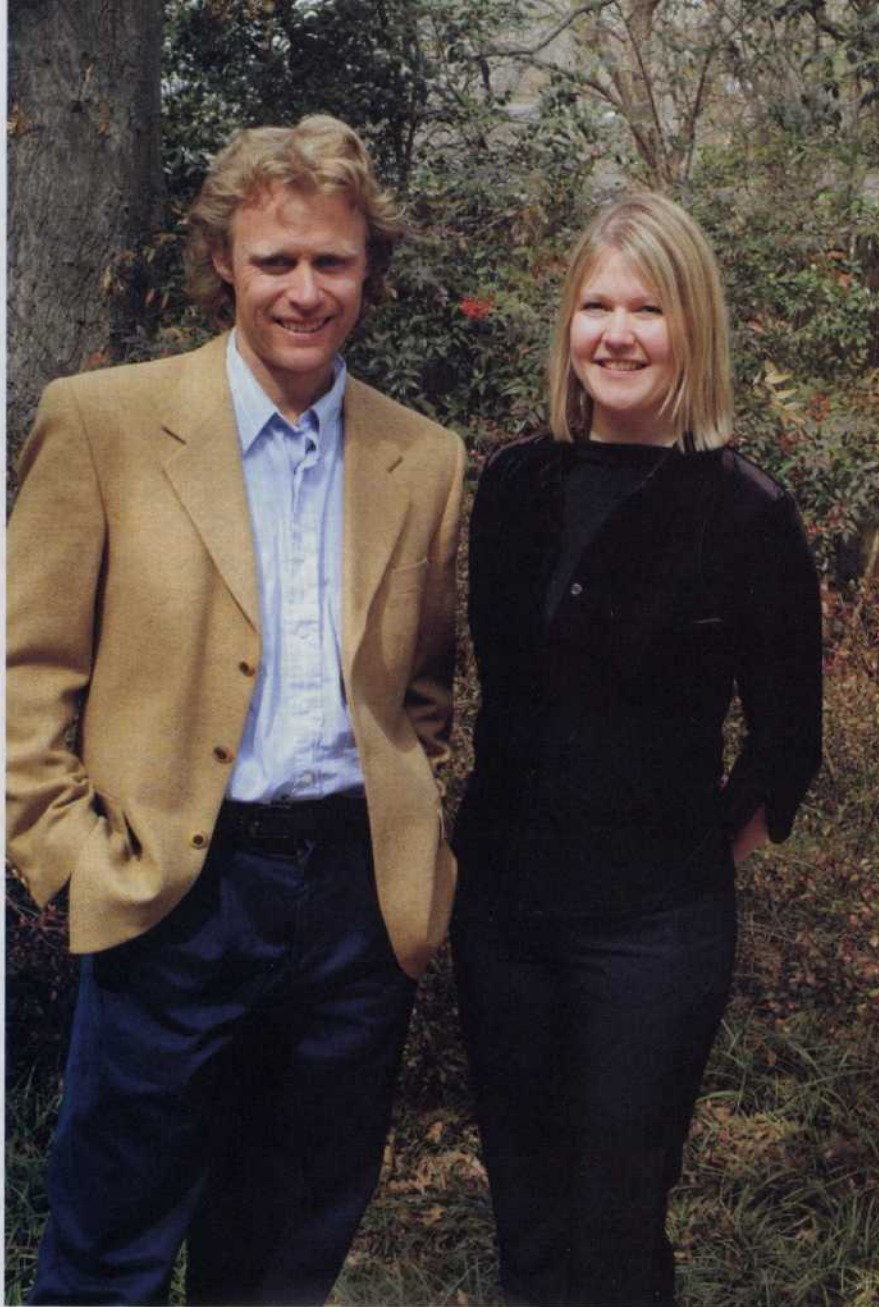
But suppose, thought the two friends, they could offer Scandinavian students educational opportunities at top American universities, providing an ongoing

memorial to the courage of the people of Scandinavia and, at the same time, promoting cultural exchange among nations. With that goal in mind, the Thanks to Scandinavia (TTS) Program was born. In 2003, the program celebrated its 40th year of providing scholarships for graduate and undergraduate study for Scandinavian students, medical professionals and teachers at universities across the United States.



In 1980, the University of Oklahoma became part of the Scandinavian network when Wall Street financier Alan C. "Ace" Greenberg established a \$250,000 TTS scholarship endowment at OU in honor of his father, Ted H. Greenberg, founder of Street's clothing stores. With Greenberg's gift, OU joined a handful of prestigious schools taking part in the scholarship program based on the unique opportunities they could offer students from Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden.

"Over the years, we have found that the Scandinavian students develop strong relationships with the community as well as the University," says Millie Audas, director of education abroad and international student services at OU. "New students meet at an orientation when they first arrive, but they quickly branch out. The community really provides that



Although their hometowns in Sweden are only four hours apart, Johan Wanstrom, left, met his wife, Linda Gissberg, at OU. When they return to Sweden after completing their graduate degrees, accompanying them will be their Norman-born daughter, Sarah, who has dual citizenship.

important human touch, so Oklahoma has begun to feel like home to a growing number of international students."

Malin Werner Eichman came to OU from Sweden in 1995 with her twin sister, Marie. "Ever since we were little, my sister and I dreamed of studying abroad," says Eichman. "We applied to four universities and were accepted at all of them. But we began talking to people who had been to OU, and they told us how much they liked it here. They were right. It's a wonderful place."

Eichman, who has degrees in English

and sociology, has put down firm roots in the Sooner State. She married an American, John Eichman, an industrial engineering doctoral student, and works as assistant to Robert Cox, director of international and area studies. "It's really great working with students who are going through a similar situation as myself," says Eichman. "Hopefully, I can be of some help to them. I tell them it's really important to get involved."

One way Scandinavian students integrate into the Norman community is through the American Scandinavian Cul-

ture Interest Group. Lloyd Iverson, a retired OU math professor, and his wife, Dorothy, were in on the ground floor of the organization and have provided hospitality for Scandinavian students since 1973, most recently for Johan Wanstrom, a communications major from Sweden. He met the Iversons when he visited their church one Sunday and has since become a regular, even lending his voice to the choir.

Although they grew up in towns only four hours apart, Wanstrom and his wife, Linda Gissberg, met at an American/Scandinavian function in Norman. Wanstrom, who has two degrees from OU and is working on his doctorate in communications, encouraged Linda to apply to the Thanks to Scandinavia program, and now, she, too, is receiving scholarship funds.

"We have been blessed with excellent opportunities here," Wanstrom says. "Naturally, we have benefited from the financial and cultural aspects of the program, but it has come to mean more than that. The program has made us more aware of our home. It makes you aware of your history and how it relates to the rest of the world. It almost feels like the whole circle has come around. Originally, Scandinavians helped Jewish people escape the horrors of Nazi Germany. Here today, descendants of those people are helping Scandinavians get an education. We are out here in the world because of the scholarship program."

His wife agrees. "I came to OU as an exchange student and wouldn't have been able to stay here without the Thanks to Scandinavia scholarship," says Gissberg. "We are very fortunate. We feel like a part of the community. I have stronger ties now with American friends than Scandinavians. I feel like a local."

Gissberg is among a growing number of Scandinavian exchange students who found they would like to stay at OU longer than the allotted two semesters and are looking to the Thanks to Scandinavia program for help.

Audas says the program is gearing up not only to accommodate these students, but also to provide new opportunities for faculty, as well. "When Mr. Borge died two years ago, he dedicated part of his estate to education," says Audas. "When



Photo Provided

Millie Audas, left, who directs OU's education abroad and services to international students, has worked closely with Thanks to Scandinavia co-founder Richard Netter, right, in fashioning the University's participation in the international scholarship program.

I was visiting with Mr. Netter earlier this year, we talked about our requesting these funds to bring students of Scandinavian descent here for a four-year degree program and creating a faculty exchange program with Scandinavian universities."

Already Cox is developing a faculty exchange program modeled after the highly successful enterprise at Luther University in Minnesota. "Soon OU will have additional doors to Scandinavia open to them," says Audas.

Paul Bell, dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, is thrilled with the growing number of Scandinavian students making OU their academic destination.

"The funds provided by Thanks to Scandinavia have made the University of Oklahoma a destination of choice for Scandinavian students," says Bell. "These talented students enhance the diversity of our student body and also attract Oklahoma students to study at one of our partner institutions in Scandinavia. We are extremely grateful for the support from the Thanks to Scandinavia Foundation and look forward to continued development of this very successful partnership."

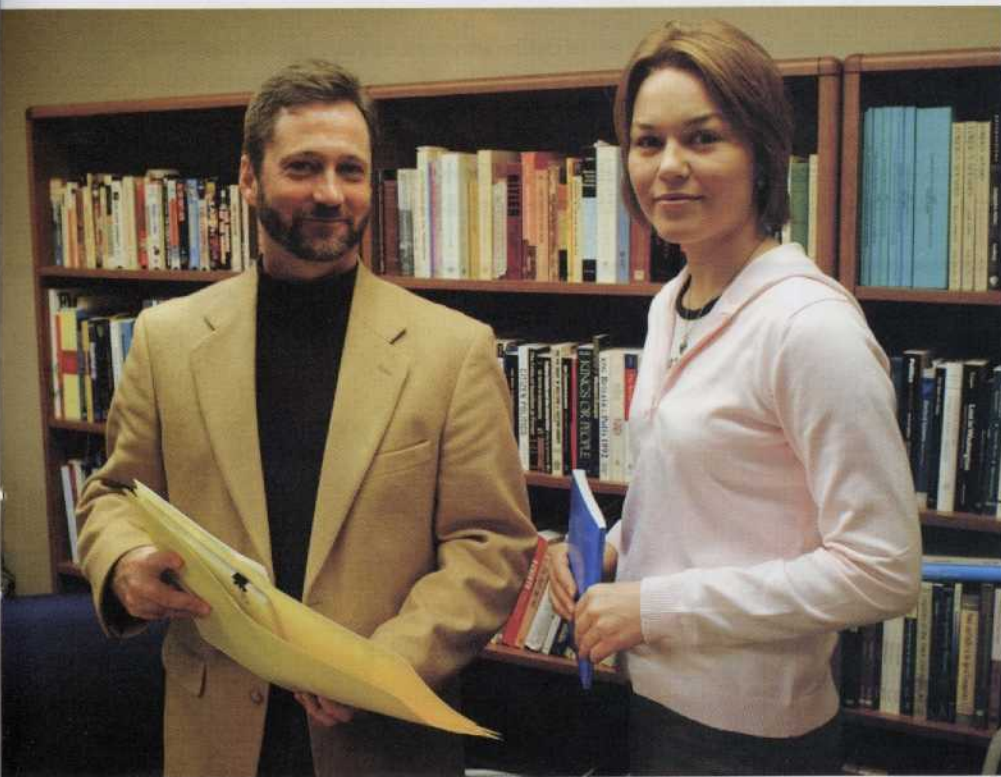
When Wanstrom and Gissberg eventually return to Sweden, they will take with them not only advanced degrees from OU, but also a lasting fondness for Oklahoma. Their daughter, Sarah, was born here and has dual citizenship. The child of two busy graduate students, Sarah's first memories very well could be of the OU campus.

In the first-floor lobby of Dale Hall Tower, the energetic toddler swings her arms and legs from the safety of a green front-pouch wrapped securely around the waist and shoulders of her father. Her eyes like blue cornflowers against a field of rose petals and cream, Sarah looks as comfortable in this ivory tower as the hordes of students shouldering backpacks, making their way to class. Although Sarah does not realize it now, she is part of a successful tribute to Scandinavians of the past and a blossom in a multicultural bouquet that will bloom for generations to come.

Robert Taylor



Lynette Lobban is a freelance writer and communications specialist for OU's Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art.



Malin Eichman, right, came to the University from Sweden in 1995, completed two degrees, married an OU doctoral student and now works as an assistant to Robert Cox, left, director of international and area studies.