

# Meet the 2016 CEF Honored Alumnus, Dr. Kenneth Olivier

Dr. Ken Olivier finds it hard to embellish on his accomplishments but he is working on it. He is the first to admit that he was not a stellar student at Caledonia High School but a series of challenges and interventions of God and close friends, helped him see himself as more capable than he believed he was.

Ken was born to Russ and Nancy Olivier in 1968 and was raised on 76th Street. He attended Caledonia Schools from kindergarten through his graduation in 1986. Ken lettered in football and tennis at CHS. He remembers Ralph Shefferly as his very intense and motivated coach. In addition, Ken sang in the school choirs and performed in school plays. He enjoyed growing up in a farming community and his first job was on a farm on 100th street. Biking past all of the farms from his house to his job made him appreciate the outdoors and open spaces.

Upon graduation, Ken attended Grand Rapids Junior College (now GRCC) before transferring to Hope College to major in Psychology and Business Administration. At GRCC he realized he could be a good student if he worked at it. Ken admits, "Part of that, honestly, was paying for school at GRCC myself. When I wrote that first check to them, and it represented virtually all my summer savings, I realized there was value in school and I should make the most of it. The best thing that happened to me academically was having a very bad calculus teacher. In my first year my teacher just read the chapter introductions and gave assignments to work on in class. I was getting a C at mid term and had to decide whether to continue or drop the class. I had never quit anything in my life so I couldn't imagine doing that. I sat down and taught myself the material. I finished the course with the 2<sup>nd</sup> best grade in the class and realized that sometimes you have to bring it yourself and not rely on someone else to bring it to you. That was an "aha" moment that motivated me to study."

Upon graduation, Ken landed a position at a PhD program for counseling and was working at Pine Rest when he realized he didn't have the temperament for counseling. This was a crossroads for Ken. He reiterates, "I had to sit down and decide what I was going to do next. Prayer and the advice of friends was a next step, but most of the time the answer comes from self—reflection and some determination." The general practice doctors at Pine Rest always seemed to enjoy their job so Ken shadowed them at Butterworth Hospital. He found the fit he was looking for so he enrolled at Grand Valley State University to study premed, and then attended medical school at Wayne State University. Ken comments, "I loved medical school and every aspect of it. I truly love medicine and taking care of cancer patients. I found my specialty very serendipitously and it blended my interest in physics with my passion for medicine." Ken goes on to say, "You won't know if you can do it until you try. What would have happened if I had given up in that process? I would have missed out on so many good things."

After finishing his doctorate in 1997, he completed research and a residency at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota. It was during this time that Ken met his wife Gloria. She was doing research at Mayo while Ken was training in Radiation Oncology. Gloria is from Chile and came to the United States to study for her doctorate. They have been married for 16 years and have two boys who are bilingual as they have spent a lot of time in Chile.



Ken with wife, Gloria, and sons, Sam and Nathan

Ken's next step in his career brought him to teach at the University of Florida. After 5 years there, he longed for the dedication to excellence that he found at the Mayo Clinic. He returned in 2008 to join a staff that cared for patients first and revenue second.

His current position is Associate Professor and Education Chair of his department.

Ken is a recognized expert in the fields of lung cancer and stereotactic radiotherapy. He has published more than 60 articles and has lectured at both national and international venues. Ken helps create exams for

his medical specialty as well. He also led a team that redesigned their practice model in Radiation Oncology. The new model made the faculty and staff more efficient and happier and saved patient's time.

Ken admits being a "cancer doctor" can be hard but it's important relevant work that he is excited to do day after day. Most all of his patients pass away from cancer, but Ken has been able to help people along their cancer journeys while making some great friends. His rewards are welcomed hugs from patients. Ken relays, "Sometimes people just need that 'what's it all mean' talk or to hear from me, 'I'm going to help you with your pain TODAY.'"

Currently, Ken is involved in many innovative things for cancer patients. Mayo has the most advanced Proton Center in the world that has opened up new options for patients. Proton therapy is a type of radiation therapy that uses high energy beams to treat tumors. Leading edge treatments allow Ken to tell patients that there IS something that can be done for them when everyone else has exhausted the options.

Ken views teaching as giving back to the community and investing in the next generation of doctors. His goal is to teach not only what is relevant right now but how to learn and the principles behind what they do. Everything has completely changed for the better since his days of residency 15 years ago. "Doctors have to

think about their training as a first step in a long process of life long learning. We should all look at work and learning that way.... keep ourselves growing," Ken comments. He is working on becoming a full professor while training a successor to take over the residency program.

Outside of Ken's career, he is dedicated to his family and raising his two sons. It is important to him to mentor them in finding successful careers and happy marriages. They spend time playing Xbox together and watch and play soccer. Visiting their cabin in northern Wisconsin gives the family time to fish, boat, and water ski. The family is involved in their church and supports cancer related charities as well.

## Ken's Advice to Young People:

### **Define yourself. Don't let others define you.**

In high school, one of my worst grades was in physics. I wasn't applying myself to the problem, but I was capable when I did apply myself. The vast majority of life is defined by hard work and being optimistic about your own potential.

**Don't make excuses.** Making an excuse robs you of the ability to be in control of your life or problem. I could have made the excuse that my terrible college calculus teacher led to my bad mid term grade. It was true but it gave me the opportunity to teach myself how to do calculus, and more broadly, that I could teach myself almost anything if I put in the effort.

**Think big thoughts about yourself.** Think optimistically about what you're capable of and be practical about reaching your goals. I get to talk to a lot of students as part of my job and I hear a lot of "Oh I could never do that." The first questions I ask is "Why?" Many times those negative self-perceptions get in the way of progress. MOST of the time there's a way across that gap or maybe a better destination than you had previously considered.

Meet Dr. Olivier at Foundation Fest on Sept 30th.