In September 2014 Brad O’Neill ’93 spoke with President Eileen B. Wilson-Oyelaran, having delivered the convocation address to the incoming Class of 2018 earlier that afternoon. O’Neill made the president a unique offer: he was willing to create and fund “K to the Bay,” an experiential learning program that would introduce Kalamazoo College students to the high-tech industry in Silicon Valley and the San Francisco Bay area. “Many top MBA programs offer such multi-day immersive learning treks,” explained O’Neill, co-founder and president of TechValidate. “I wanted to provide that MBA-level opportunity for K undergraduates.”

Less than three months later, during K’s fall-to-winter-term break, seniors Drew Hopper, Tessa Lathrop, Emerson Talanda-Fisher, and Cheryl Zhang, along with Amy MacMillan, the L. Lee Stryker Assistant Professor of Business Management, were on a plane to San Francisco. “I was delighted with how Amy, the economics and business department, the Center for Career and Professional Development, and the Office of Development partnered with me and worked at ‘Silicon-Valley speed’ to make ‘K to the Bay’ a reality,” said O’Neill. “As a result, K students were able to experience what high-tech companies do, how they drive an industry, and the challenges they face.”

The seniors, MacMillan, and O’Neill had 13 onsite meetings over two and a half days with O’Neill’s network of industry leaders, including Parker Conrad, chief executive officer at Zenefits; Geoff Smith, co-founder and chief technology officer at StumbleUpon; Ted Wang, counsel for high-tech companies such as Facebook, Twitter, Square, and Dropbox; Michael Copeland and Kent Goldman, partners at top venture capital firms Andreessen & Horowitz and Upside Partnership, respectively; and K alumni Joe Shields ’03, director of strategy at Jump Associates, a strategic consulting firm.

“It is nearly impossible to get two minutes with executives of this caliber,” said MacMillan, “let alone up to an hour of give-and-take discussion. Their genuineness and generosity in sharing perspectives with us was amazing. Brad O’Neill gave us a chance to mingle with some of the best minds in Silicon Valley and to feel the collaborative, highly driven, entrepreneurial spirit that pervades there.”

During winter term the four students and MacMillan, with O’Neill on video conference, shared what they learned from “K to the Bay” to a rapt audience of more than 100 people. The students detailed how the trip changed their previous conceptions, affected their professional plans, and would influence the remainder of their time at the College. “The tech industry is not just about computer science,” Zhang indicated. “It uses programming as the backbone, but also requires other fields—including marketing, law, politics, communications, education, and psychology—to bring value to their products and bring life to ideas.”

Each student noted a strengthened self-confidence as a result of the program. “Coming to the Bay Area and Silicon Valley, I believed that people who obtained startup, high-tech, and venture capital jobs graduated from MIT, Stanford, Berkeley, and Harvard,” Lathrop shared. “My ‘K to the Bay’ experience helped me believe that I belong in Silicon Valley just as much as Ivy League alumni.”

The value of K’s liberal arts education was also evident. “It was clear that the College provides ideal preparation for a high-tech environment,” said MacMillan. “Our students possess strong analytical and communication skills, the ability to work in teams, global perspectives, and, above all, an insatiable desire to learn.”

Based on the success of “K to the Bay,” O’Neill would love to see this experiential learning model grow and become a differentiated component of K’s winter breaks, inclusive of various relevant geographies and industries. “Additional programs could be made possible by the vision and generosity of the College’s alumni, parents, and friends,” he said. “Such ventures would add yet another component to make K’s liberal arts education vital and exceptional in an increasingly complex and competitive world.”

To get involved with or provide support for “K to the Bay” or new experiential opportunities for Kalamazoo College students in other geographies and industries, please contact Debra Ball at 269.337.7238 or debra.ball@kzoo.edu.
Pat Ponto, Ph.D., director of the College’s counseling center, is the 2015 Lux Esto Award winner. The Lux Esto Award was established in 2007 to honor a current faculty or staff member who has served the College for 26 years or more and during that period made significant contributions, provided good will, and shown dedication to the campus community and College mission.

During her long career at K, Pat has worked directly and individually with more than 2,000 students. She has helped colleagues identify and help students in need of assistance. Pat also has deepened understanding in the campus community of matters such as student sexual behavior, Asperger’s Syndrome, stress, time management, and student responses to the experience of study abroad and the return to campus. President Eileen B. Wilson O’Cahan presented the award and said, “Pat is a masterful problem solver. Credibility, trust, and competence are the hallmarks of her work. She is humble, hardworking, gentle, empathetic, supportive, practical, and firm. She is wise and present when things are at their worst. She is the reason that our students seek help when they need it.”
I'm a member of the 21st generation of Peace Corps Volunteers to serve in Kyrgyzstan, a tiny, mountainous former Soviet republic in the middle of Asia. I'm also a graduate of Kalamazoo College (class of 2012). Though I find it amusing to have hopped from one “K” to another, the phonetic similarity is the least of the connections between my experiences at Kalamazoo College and in Kyrgyzstan.

Joining the Peace Corps and the way I approach my role in Kyrgyzstan are framed by things I learned from my mentors and friends at K. Professor [Emeritus of Sociology] Kim Cummings told me about being a Peace Corps Volunteer in Central America in the 1960s. He said the experience taught him the skills he used for decades as a community organizer in Kalamazoo. The incredible Alison Geist [director of the Center for Civic Engagement], who was a volunteer in Morocco, said that “as Peace Corps Volunteers, it’s our duty to criticize the Peace Corps”—words I reflect upon frequently. LandSea director Jory Horner spent a long hike patiently listening to me explain all the reasons why I should withdraw my Peace Corps application, and he was supportive a week later when I told him I’d decided to join after all. Gail Griffin [professor emerita of English] taught me to think critically about gender and social position, and instilled in me the fire of feminism. Discussions with my K friends—about justice, and service, and privilege, and social change—shaped my worldview. K taught me a lot about the messy, joyful business of being part of a small community, about engaging in social change collaboratively and thoughtfully, about valuing and investing in people.

In Kyrgyzstan I have many conversations too. I like to ask older people what life was like during the Soviet Union. Some people say things were better in those days, some say the opposite. My host “father” (who is only five years older than me) is quite the conversationalist, and we talk about colonialism and religion, Nazis, dating in the United States versus Kyrgyzstan, world history, food, tradition, and beekeeping. As a health education volunteer I ask a lot of questions about that subject, especially about family planning and reproductive health. Sometimes questions about this topic come back to me—women ask about birth control options available in our area, or steps they can take to have a healthy pregnancy. I work with an excellent group of high school students, volunteers who work with me as peer health educators, and I have conversations with them about many topics, often about their hopes and visions for the future.

I left Kyrgyzstan in June, and my community looked about the same as it did when I arrived. Sometimes Peace Corps Volunteers expect big changes exclusively. But to think that way risks missing something important. Although I cannot point to trash-free streets or a shiny new hospital as evidence of my time in Kyrgyzstan, I have expanded my circle. I’ve had some great conversations, and new words stick with me. I’ve gained amazing friends, and I hope that they have benefited somehow from our time together. I certainly did.