



DISTINGUISHED ALUMNUS AWARD

Alumni awards are important for schools for several reasons. They recognize and celebrate the professional and personal accomplishments of alumni, building a sense of pride among current students, staff, and other alumni. Alumni awards also foster a stronger sense of community by maintaining and deepening the connection between the school and its graduates, which encourages ongoing involvement and support from alumni. Highlighting the achievements of alumni also provides current students with role models and demonstrates the potential paths they can take after

graduation. It instills a sense of aspiration and motivates students to pursue their goals with the knowledge that success is possible.

The Avon Old Farms Distinguished Alumnus Award recognizes a deserving alumnus who has achieved distinction in his professional career, humanitarian endeavors, or other areas of his life. This award honors an individual who has embraced the core values emphasized at Avon Old Farms. This year, two members of the Class of 1984 are being honored with Avon's Distinguished Alumnus Award: Brett Jefferson and Dean Graham.

Brett Jefferson '84

Brett arrived at Avon Old Farms as a sophomore in 1981, quickly embracing the Avon community. Inspired by role models among faculty and students, he thrived within Avon's rigorous structure both academically and personally. He played varsity football, hockey, and lacrosse, captaining the 1984 lacrosse team, which was inducted into Avon's Athletic Hall of Fame in 2009.

Brett attended Syracuse University, where he earned a bachelor's degree in English and played on the varsity lacrosse team. The team was the NCAA runner-up in 1985 and won the national championship in 1988. In 2023, Brett was named a Letterwinner of Distinction at Syracuse. In 1996, he received his MBA from Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Management and moved to New York City to pursue a career in finance.

Starting at Smith Barney, Brett worked as a banker in a new asset class focusing on packaging complex credit instruments. In 2002, he joined Marathon Asset Management, becoming a pioneer in structured credit. In 2008, Brett founded Hildene Capital Management to focus on investments within structured credit. The name Hildene stems from the Lincoln family summer home in Vermont, where Brett was married. Hildene has since grown into a highly successful asset management business, winning multiple industry awards and becoming a preeminent firm in the industry with a reputation for innovative thinking. In 2022, Hildene announced the formation of Hildene



Re, a captive reinsurance business to further its growth. Avon's influence was pivotal for Brett, providing the foundation and confidence to strive for greatness.

"Being nominated for this award is probably more meaningful to me than many other awards because it truly all started at Avon," Brett shares. "I often wonder what my life could have been had I not attended Avon, and it's not a pretty thought. I needed to be around people who wanted to be successful—successful

friends, athletes, and role models. Avon provided that, and, looking back, it made all the difference."

In honor of his mother, Catherine, who worked tirelessly to enable Brett to attend Avon, Brett and his wife, also named Catherine, established the Catherine Jefferson Foundation in 2012. This foundation led to the creation of the Edward A. Russell '84 Scholarship at Avon, named after Brett's close friend and lacrosse teammate who passed away in 1995. Brett takes great pride in meeting the

scholarship recipients and seeing Eddie's legacy continue through their success.

To the current students of Avon Old Farms, Brett offers this advice: "One of the main problems I see facing today's young people is the pressure to have everything figured out by the age of 15. In a very fast-paced and ever-changing world, I don't think you should expect to have it figured out at that age. Instead, focus on developing skills—time management, maturity, life skills, and people skills. Know that you may have to adjust as the world changes. You'll probably have to reinvent yourself at some point, and that's where those life skills will lead you."

As Brett reflects on his journey, he expresses deep gratitude for the experiences and connections that Avon Old Farms provided. "Avon did a lot for me, and I have no idea where I would be without it. The school doesn't operate on its own; it takes a community. I'm fortunate to be able to help others go to Avon and to meet the scholarship recipients who carry on the legacy of our class."

With this award, Avon Old Farms celebrates not only Brett's professional achievements but also his commitment to giving back to the school that shaped him. His story is a powerful reminder of the lasting impact Avon has on its students and the profound ways in which alumni can contribute to the continued success of the school and its community. Brett and his wife live in Durham, North Carolina, with their three children: Tyler, Reese, and Izzy.

"Brett Jefferson and I began our Avon Old Farms adventures together,

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— BRETT JEFFERSON '84

in the fall of 1981 in Eagle Dormitory," reminisces former Head of School Ken LaRocque H'19, P'01, '10. "Looking at Brett's journey through Avon and beyond, I am impressed, but not surprised, by the success he has enjoyed. Brett is a doggedly determined person who embraces challenges rather than evading them, who unabashedly and resolutely pursues his goals no matter the degree of difficulty. As a young 15-year-old, away from home for the first time, Brett took advantage of the opportunities Old Farms presented him to claim his independence, to forge friendships, to manage his responsibilities, to compete, and to stretch himself past his comfort zone in all areas of life. Taking those life lessons and skills with him to Syracuse and beyond, Brett has evolved into a highly successful man, not only in business but also as a family man and citizen of the world. I could not be prouder of him."

Dean Graham '84

Dean grew up in Avon, Conn. However, attending the private all-boys boarding school in town wasn't always a part of the plan. "There was a soccer coach, Juan Comella, who somehow reached out to me and my family to talk about Avon. I ended up applying and attending as a ninth grader. This guy saw me play at Fisher Meadows, recruited me, I ended up getting a scholarship, and the rest is history. Without him, my whole journey would have been completely different."

Dean excelled academically and won numerous awards while at Avon Old Farms, including the Harvard Book Prize for academic excellence and high character combined with achievement in other fields. In athletics, he shone in varsity soccer, swimming, and he too was a member of the Hall of Fame 1984 lacrosse team. Every summer, Dean worked with Avon's dorm crews doing maintenance and repair work, even cleaning the most daunting location on campus—the tunnels under the heating grates in the Riddle Refectory. These grates, with their wide mesh, are infamous for eating up food almost as quickly as Avon students. "I was down there with a flashlight, scooping out old spaghetti from the 1970s!" recalls Dean. For him, the task that would leave a good number of students aghast made Avon all the more endearing. Dean's leadership and commitment to his school was recognized in his election as Vice Warden of the Student Council and Head Day Student Monitor. At graduation, he received the Founder's Medal.

Avon's philosophy of hard work, brotherhood, scholarship, integrity, and sportsmanship continued to guide Dean after graduation. He attended Harvard University on a work-study scholarship where he earned an AB with distinction in history and played varsity lacrosse. Reflecting on his time at Avon, Dean credits the school with preparing him for the challenges he would face at Harvard and beyond. "The discipline, the goal setting, the mentorship I received at Avon—these were all instrumental in shaping my future," Dean recalls. "When I arrived at Harvard, I realized how well prepared I was, all thanks to Avon."

After graduation, he played professional lacrosse in Australia before earning a master's in political philosophy at the University of Cambridge and a JD from the University of Virginia School of Law. Dean began his career in Washington, D.C., as an attorney specializing in corporate finance and later became a nationally recognized finance executive and entrepreneur. In 2001, he co-founded and became the President and CEO of CapitalSource Inc., one of the largest independent commercial finance companies in the United States. Over the last two decades, he founded and was CEO of several successful private credit and specialty finance companies.

"You never know which class or mentor will shape your life, but looking back, one stands out for me: Peter Evans and his US history course. He encouraged me to enter a constitutional essay contest, where my paper on the Fourth Amendment reached the finals. Through that contest, I got to meet a Connecticut state court judge and Harvard alum,

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who would end up writing a college recommendation for me. That whole experience also encouraged my decision to pursue law. That's just one way Avon has been keeping a steady, invisible hand on my ship's rudder."

Dean remained closely connected to Avon Old Farms throughout his career. He joined the Board of Directors in 2004, becoming the youngest chairman in the school's history. Under Dean's leadership, together with Head of School Kenneth LaRocque, the Board spearheaded significant campus developments, including the Beatson Performing Arts Center, the Athletic Complex, and the Brown Student Center, which transformed Mrs. Riddle's campus. In recognition of his service and dedication to the school, Dean was awarded the Alumni Order of Old Farms.

"There exists a long list of Avonians who have impacted the Winged Beaver community in important ways, and Dean Graham is one of those individuals," says Ken, who introduced both Dean and Brett

at the Distinguished Alumnus Award ceremony over Reunion Weekend. "His service and generosity to the Old Farms community is impressive. From hosting numerous alumni receptions at the Chevy Chase Club, to his long tenure on our Board of Directors, to his enthusiastic advocacy of our school, he is a true Man of Avon. Thanks to Dean's business acumen, we were able to create a financial plan that allowed us to build a host of critically needed facilities on campus during the early and mid-2000s. As Chairman of our Board of Directors, Dean successfully led us through our first major capital campaign while deftly guiding us through the financial crisis of 2008, the major fire in Brown House Dormitory, and countless other challenges. I leaned on him heavily during those trying times, and Dean always answered my call and had my back when I had difficult decisions to make. Dean's leadership and tireless efforts on behalf of Avon Old Farms have helped transform our school in meaningful ways. He is clearly a distinguished alumnus who has selflessly served our community throughout his life."

As you might expect, Avon continues to hold a special place in the hearts of the Graham family. Dean's brother graduated in 1985, and Dean and his wife, Debra, were married in the Chapel. Their three children attended numerous events and camps at Avon, and Dean's parents were awarded the Adams Medal for outstanding service to the school. In appreciation, Dean and his wife established the Graham Family Scholarship to provide financial aid to Avon students. Dean remains

forever grateful to the teachers, coaches, and mentors who had a positive influence on his life's journey.

"I have known Dean Graham for some forty years," comments Peter Evans H'18, P'98, former AOF faculty, coach, dean, and director of development. "Driven to do his best in the right way always, Dean has been a high-energy, other-centered individual who captures the essence of Avon's motto: *aspirando et perseverando*. From when I knew him as an outstanding scholar-athlete at Avon in the '80s to this day, some things haven't changed. His smile is contagious, and his sense of humor is driven by positive thinking. Simply put, it's uplifting to be around him. Dean loves people and is a loyal friend. On the Avon Old Farms School front, Dean has been a long-time proponent and supporter of the school. I vividly recall when he was willing to take over Chairman of the Board responsibilities at a pivotal moment. In this regard, Dean has been an important contributing force toward the dramatic evolution of Avon Old Farms in recent decades. For this, we owe Dean a sincere debt of gratitude."

Dean's reaction to receiving the Distinguished Alumnus Award was one of genuine surprise. "I was completely shocked when I found out," he admits. "It's an incredible honor, but it's not something I ever sought. My gratitude goes to the school, the teachers, and the staff who truly deserve recognition."

The legacies of Brett Jefferson and Dean Graham serve as powerful testaments to the enduring impact of Avon Old Farms. Through their remarkable achievements and unwavering commitment to Avon's



values, they have not only distinguished themselves in their respective fields but also given back generously to the community that shaped them. With their stories now added to the Distinguished Alumnus Award wall in the Brown Student Center, future generations of Avonians will read

about these two exceptional leaders and draw inspiration from their stories. As students walk the paths Brett and Dean once did, they can look to these alumni as beacons of aspiration and perseverance, embodying the spirit of Avon Old Farms. 