When Conrad Weber was young, he used to stare at the cover of Michael W. Smith’s album “The Live Set.” There was Smith, in his “80s hair,” bathed in the glow of red stage lights. Conrad would immerse himself in that picture. “It was me onstage,” he said. “It was me on that keyboard.”

Weber shared this memory with RBC students during the college’s new Pathways Week, October 6-10. “I have always wanted, more than anything else,” he said, “to play and perform onstage with professional musicians.”

And yet now he teaches music in the public schools of Atmore, Alabama. How he got there, and how he views that process, is the story of a life journey that took unexpected turns.

Conrad’s talk kicked off RBC’s first Pathways Week, part of an initiative designed to help students “find their voice.” Faculty member Ken Miller explains, “The purpose of Pathways is to give our students examples of how God has guided and led people in many different callings.”

Miller stressed that RBC believes strongly in foreign missions, but “we also recognize that God calls people to all walks of life. We wanted our students to hear and see that.”

Three other people shared their stories during Pathways Week: Ann Miller, a physical therapist in the Columbus, Ohio city schools; and Dot and Larry Chupp, entrepreneurs and co-founders of American Reliance Industries (ARI Legacy Sleepers) in Shipshewana, Indiana.

Although the speakers’ experiences were varied, they shared a common theme: even as their paths took unexpected turns, they could see that God was on the journey with them.

Conrad Weber

Conrad Weber’s pathway seemed clear to him: it started with a deep desire to make it as a professional musician, to record, to perform, to do the things musicians do.

But detours abounded. After studying at the University of West Florida, Conrad attended the University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music (CCM). By this time, he felt that God was calling him to a career in pastoral ministry as a music and worship leader.

Conrad and his wife Leslie loved their time in Cincinnati, but they “experienced a restlessness that led them [back] to Alabama,” where Conrad had grown up. It didn’t take long for them to feel that the move had been “a huge mistake.”

“We had no idea how much we’d changed,” he said. And southern Alabama was not the ideal place to pursue a career in music. “It was incredibly difficult.”

Conrad had never dealt with depression before, but now “a fog rolled into my life and my soul.” It remained, he said, at “varying degrees of foggy” for the next six to eight years.

He thought he was following God, but this was not how things were supposed to turn out. “I thought I’d really messed up my life.”

Seeing live music on TV made him feel like someone “was sticking a knife” in his heart. He went to a concert of Celtic music, a favorite of his. When the first song began, tears poured down his face. “What I saw was people doing what I wanted more than anything else to do.”

One day as he was in his car, he cried out to God. “God, all I ever wanted to do was to play music. . . . You made me that way. I didn’t choose this. I even tried to give it up entirely.
“All I ever wanted to do was play and perform. And we’re following you and you’re bringing us to the one place where the one thing that I can’t do is exactly what I want to do. Here I am and all I want—I can’t do it here. Thanks a lot, God.”

Here is how Conrad heard God’s answer: “He said, yeah, I know it’s hard, but this is exactly where I want you to be, where the one thing that you want more than anything else is the one thing you can’t do.

“I need you in that spot to begin the work that I want to do in your heart.”

At this point, said Conrad, several things happened, things that the students in his audience might also experience someday.

“I began a search to find out why I am the way I am.” Psalm 139 helped him with this, God has knit us together, he said, “the way he wants us to be.”

Conrad didn’t want “to live with this cloud forever,” so he asked for help. He found guidance through mentors, books, counseling and prayers.

Reading the work of Tim Keller gave him new insight into the meaning of the Gospel. “Before I do anything, I am fully and completely loved by God – in my sin. I cannot be loved more by God.”

He finally let go. “Okay, God, you decide what musical success looks like for me. I can’t figure this out. The weight of this is crushing me… I have three children, it affects their lives now.”

He told God he’d go anywhere, or stay put. “Here’s the paper and the pen… you write the story.”

God started turning his heart toward working with people who were disadvantaged and coming out of difficult situations. Over time, he was drawn to teaching music in a public school setting. A job came up and he took it.

“I thought I’d find my calling,” he said. “I didn’t.”

He’d gone into the classroom thinking he’d create “all these Oprah and Hallmark moments. These kids are just sitting there waiting for some middle-aged white guy to come in and tell them how to get out of poverty.”

But the students in his classes didn’t care about what he had to say.

“I had let go of trying to make it in music, but I couldn’t figure out why I still had to deal with the clouds and the fog and the constant restlessness.” This led to another round of “the same moves” – going to a life coach this time, digging deeper into what was going on.

“God showed me some powerful things at this stage.” Conrad discovered that although he was moving in a God-honoring direction, he wanted to live a life for God that other people thought was impressive.

“It was huge for me to understand that I wanted to do great things for God, and I wanted you to think it was cool.” In this process, “God said, ‘Am I enough? Is it enough to have me say that I’m pleased with you?’”

God showed Conrad that he was “holding out this ideal life and it was ideal in the eyes of other people, and it was an idol… it was never going to satisfy.”

Even though he’d gotten to a certain level of success, he looked around and saw others doing better. “When God really got to the issue of where my approval was based, then things began to change inside of me.”

He began to be free, free in God’s love for him, free not to look to everybody else for approval. “It’s only God’s approval that really satisfies.”

This freed him up to go to work and do his best; it freed him to love and challenge the people he’s teaching and leave the results up to “the one who holds everything in his hands.”

This is not, he said, a one-time thing. He has to answer God’s question, “Am I enough?” every week.

“It’s been 12 years since I’ve performed,” he said. “It’s hard for me to be okay with that.” But when he helps his students experience the things he loves about music, when he can get them into a recording studio or help them perform in front of hundreds of people and get a standing ovation, he knows he’s where God wants him.

Conrad shared his prayer for the students who were listening to him: that they would sense God’s deep longing for them to walk with him; that they would take his love, which he’s given to them freely, out into their lives; and that they would sense a freedom to explore who God has made them to be.

“He knit you together to serve him in full-time ministry in that way, in a unique pathway that he has for you.” Full-time ministry is not a career choice, he said. “It’s how you do the work that God brings into your life at any given time.”

In his second session, Conrad encouraged his listeners to dive into the culture and think of whatever they’re called to do as ministry.

As Christians, Conrad said, “we receive the unconditional love that we give away in service to others, whatever our job is.” We give that love away. “If God gives his love to me, when I don’t deserve it, I should do the same.”

Every job has this potential. “You do good work as worship to God,” and his love comes to you “on its way to someone else.” Working in a non-church job “gives you access to people who are much harder to reach for a pastor.”

Conrad drew two overlapping circles on a whiteboard. He labeled one circle “Job/vocation” and the other “Love/are good at.” The goal, he said, was to work toward more and more overlap between these two circles. Ideally, your vocation will also be something you love and are good at.

Asking yourself “How can I be doing the most good for
the cause of Christ?” can help you prioritize your goals when you’re choosing a career. It’s not a quick or easy process, but you can trust the sovereignty of God.

Quoting Larry Osborne’s *A Contrarian’s Guide to Knowing God*, he said, “Follow the light that you have. Trust God for the next step.” And understand that it takes “time to figure out your pathway.”

**Ann Miller**

Ann Miller is a physical therapist for the Columbus public schools, the largest city school district in Ohio. She works with kids with disabilities.

She shared a verse which has guided her for years, Galatians 6:10: “Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially those who belong to the family of believers.”

At this point in her life, she said, “I have more opportunities than I know what to do with.”

She stressed the “importance of doing small things consistently, with integrity.” God helps her grasp that the goal is not to find the perfect context in which to do great things. The goal is “to fix your eyes on Jesus wherever you are.”

Ann encouraged her listeners to pursue God by knowing about him, learning about him” and by practicing sobriety, kindness, integrity, and attention to “the small things.”

“If you do those things,” she said, “you look around and your life has become a ministry.”

When she was younger, she only imagined her life one way: she’d be married by 23, have “a pile of kids, and be dirt poor. . . . I grew up poor.”

Today, at 44, she has no husband or kids, is financially secure, and has “a fantastic job.” She has not always been happy about this. As a younger woman, she could get angry at God. Looking back, though, she sees his hand at work in her life. When she was 20, she spent six months in Voluntary Service (VS) in Arkansas, “working with handicapped kids.”

This experience ultimately helped her realize her gifting.

Not only that, it gave her an edge when she took the plunge and applied to the Ohio State University physical therapy program. Only 10% of applicants got into the program; her six months in VS helped set her apart.

After graduating, she worked as a pediatric therapist for Easter Seals before moving to the Columbus City schools. It was, she said, “an eye-opening experience” to see the lives of the kids she works with up close.

She loves her job, which gives her a chance to use her organizational and creative skills. It is “intellectually stimulating, medically demanding” and gives her daily “opportunities to stand in the gap.”

She also gets to be “kind of a nut at work” and derives a lot of joy from her job.

Her work has also provided an unexpected turn – the opportunity to connect with lots of immigrant and refugee families. When she did her M.A. in education at OSU, she looked at the experience of refugee children with disabilities in the US school system.

There are, she said, “over 45,000 Somalis in Central Ohio. Fifteen percent speak English well enough to get a job; 99.9% are Muslims.”

She appreciates that Mennonites and Somalis have a history together through Mennonite health services and education efforts in Somalia. She is also aware of the power of “acts of friendship and kindness” to forge connections with her Somali friends.

“You have to establish long, long-standing relationships to discuss religious faith” and other serious topics in these situations, she said.

Ann concluded by urging students to “watch for opportunities, watch for context. . . . Ministry is loving other people for the sake of God.”

She added, “Don’t be paralyzed by the fear of choosing the wrong context. My life doesn’t look anything like I thought it would.”

And even though many people urge others to get out of their comfort zone, she told students to “get into your comfort zone – do what you love.”

Her final piece of advice? “Set your eyes on Christ and sail forth!”

**Dot and Larry Chupp**

Dot and Larry Chupp are co-directors of the Rosedale Business Group. They describe their work as “walking alongside Christian businesspeople in a way that is Kingdom building.”

Dot began their presentation this way: “The road one takes in an entrepreneurial journey really is a pathway.”

She and Larry shared their life journey as a couple, beginning with their time in Teustepe, Nicaragua, with Rosedale Mennonite Missions in the mid-70s.

Teustepe is in an arid zone; one year while they were there, it only rained once for over five minutes. During this severe drought, people in outlying communities asked for help getting water, so they started well projects.

Once the wells were dug, Dan Byler from RMM came along behind to start schools and churches. At that time, there was only one church. Now, 38 years later, there are perhaps 30 churches.

Dot shared one intriguing outcome of this time. Dan
Byler mentored Pedro José. “Arcadio, his son, married Sonia, a little girl who often came to our house to play.” Arcadio accepted Jesus, became a pastor in the church in San Gerónimo, and for a time was the president of the Nicaragua Mennonite Conference.

Today, Arcadio and Sonia’s son Jonatan “is one of the candidates who is leaving in early 2015 to go to Southeast Asia to work with Dan Byler.”

Dot quoted Dan Byler, who said, “Never underestimate what God will do with a drought and a cup of water.”

Re-entry into North American culture was difficult for them, and they also faced their own “unexpected turn”—they learned they were unable to have children. This was very painful, but Larry said, “We know God was using it. We see it as both difficult and as God would have it.”

Larry worked in engineering and cost accounting for Jayco before starting his own business building RVs. He felt the time was right; if he started while he was in his late 20s, he might be successful. If not, he could pay it back before he retired.

The night he turned 30 he made his final decision to go into business. This meant long hours, lots of tension, and overcoming obstacles to setting up a dealer network. He worked 70-80 hours a week, and after the initial (and expected) rocky years, the company did well.

At the beginning of the sixth year, said Larry, “the economy went south.” They were working on a large order from a dealer who’d been assured of financing from a nationally known company. After the order was almost built, the finance company “went back on their word.”

This was a bitter time. Only five months before, Dot had been fired from the job she loved, a job she had held for 16 years.

The end result was the decision to close the business and find a way to pay off the debt they had incurred.

“We never know,” said Dot, “when something occurs in our lives and it feels like the worst of the worst. It could actually be the way God is going to use to push us where he wants us.”

Jesus, she said, is the blessed Redeemer of all things. “Sometimes we end up far from where we thought we were headed. Life brings twists and turns. We aim one direction and we land somewhere else.”

When we can face the twists and turns in life, knowing that God is in control and he has an answer, she said, “we’re better equipped to endure heartache and discouragement when it comes our way.”

Her faith was shaken, but not lost. Larry was a rock of support when she lost her job, but when the business had to close, they were like “two broken bodies, trying to hold each other up.”

Ultimately, they decided to drive truck to pay the debt off. Dot went into this very reluctantly. At first, she said, “No way!” and turned her head to avoid seeing trucks when they were out on the road.

Larry got certified first, then trained Dot on the road. When she went in for her test, she laid her head on the steering wheel and cried out a prayer to pass—while her examiner was sitting right beside her.

She took the test, passed it, ran into the testing center, crawled under a desk and cried.

The Chupps left on their first trip together as a team, and their office became “an ever-changing picture window.”

In their first full year, they drove more miles than any other truck in the 250-truck fleet—258,000 miles. It was exhausting, but they were focused on debt reduction.

“I didn’t care how many hours I had to work,” said Larry. “I wanted a job to give the greatest income with the least expense. Paying for something that has died is an embarrassment. It is of no material value.”

The experience stretched them. They met “colorful and precious people” and discovered “a mission field” in the trucking industry. The Chupps paid off the debt in just over a year, moved into the truck owner-operator business, and
drove over a million miles in seven years. The sleeper they built for the second truck they owned propelled them into the business (American Reliance Industries) that they sold out of in January 2014, said Larry. Dot concluded: “God takes developments that are disappointing and uses them as part of the preparation for what will come later. The message becomes clear as the picture comes into focus with the long view.”

God moves in mysterious ways, so why are we surprised by this? Because we’re human, she said. Yet “God uses the worst of the worst. If there hadn’t been a drought in 1976, would people have come?”

Jesus used these experiences to teach them “how to manage and to lead, not lording it over people.”

Larry added that he used to sit in the truck and think, “It’s a curse to sit here, paying for something I can’t see.” Today, he said, he has a different picture. “I realize that I’m not qualified to determine what’s a curse and what’s a blessing. Because it’s very hard to tell in God’s economy.”

God uses our inadequacies, said Larry, and he “delights in our willingness. . . . Let’s ask him to use us.”

Rosedale is continuing to host speakers who discuss their life journeys. Other plans include helping students outline successful transfer paths from RBC to 4-year degrees and pointing students to professional career counseling resources.

President Jon Showalter is pleased with the outcome of the first Pathways Week presentation series. “All the early indications are that we’re on the right track with this program,” he said. “We’ve heard some amazing stories, and we’re addressing a need that many of our students have at this stage of their life.”

Seth Mast, a second-year student from Grantsville, Maryland, appreciated hearing that “you may discover your career through a journey or process, rather than a one-time decision.”

He also cited a comment from one of the speakers: “God is more concerned with who we are becoming than with what we are doing.” This made him realize, again, “that life has a deeper meaning and value than any career choice.” Many careers exist, he said, “that are viable ways of living out this deeper meaning.”