

The footprints we leave as we go along

Remarks at the 10th anniversary celebration
UWC Costa Rica

2017-03-31

Sir John Daniel
Chair, UWC International Board

Good evening:

Ms Susan Mullins, Chair of the Executive Board and Board members;
Mr. Mauricio Viales, Head;
Pupils, alumni and staff of UWC Costa Rica;
Heads of UWC institutions worldwide; Members of National Committees;
Executive Director of the International Office;
Representatives of SOS Children's Villages
Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen.

It is my great pleasure, as chair of the UWC International Board, to greet you on behalf of the whole UWC movement and to congratulate the United World College of Costa Rica on reaching its tenth anniversary. Tonight, we celebrate a decade of wonderful achievement that has launched hundreds of alumni into successful studies at universities worldwide and into important careers.

This is a young college: even the first alumni are not yet thirty. But we are confident that the skills, knowledge and experience they have acquired here will lead them on to productive careers and fulfilled lives. They will remember how they developed at this College and will continue to support it.

Even a short speech should have a title. Today it is *'the footprints we leave as we go along'*. That is from a statement by Per Grieg Sr., who once said: 'What matters are the footprints we leave as we go along. Footprints that give people less fortunate than us an opportunity to develop and move on in their lives.'

I shall say more about Per Grieg, because this 10th anniversary is a good time to recall the origins and early development of UWC Costa Rica while most of those involved are still alive and can see the success of what they created.

The first contact between this College and the UWC movement occurred early this century when a former staff member of UWC Pearson College in Canada was briefly head of the then SOS Hermann Gmeiner International College in Costa Rica, part of the worldwide SOS Children's Villages organisation. This brought the institution to the attention of the late Jim Coutts, one of several larger-than-life personalities involved in this story.

Coutts, as secretary to two Canadian prime ministers, Lester B. Pearson and Pierre Elliott Trudeau, was closely associated with UWC Pearson. Hearing that SOS Children's Villages was interested in further developing their school in Costa Rica, Coutts proposed to them, in

his brash way, that UWC would be pleased to convert the school into a UWC, but it would cost them \$50 million.

So, in March 2005, a UWC delegation consisting of Christian Hodeige, then chair of the International Board, Keith Clark, executive director of the International Office, and Derek Blackman, who is here with us today, were summoned to SOS Children's Villages' headquarters in Innsbruck, Austria.

The meeting was chaired by SOS's head, another larger-than-life personality, whom everyone addressed as President Kutin. The UWC delegation half expected to be dismissed as an arrogant bunch of pretenders, but instead SOS Children's Villages admitted that they did not have the expertise to run a secondary school.

Per Grieg offered \$6 million over five years and SOS said we could have the school campus for a nominal rent if we would agree to transform it into a United World College by 2006. Our delegation was told to leave the room and return with a decision within the hour. When back they replied, with plenty of 'ifs', 'buts', and 'maybes', that UWC would agree to take on the challenge but with a target date of 2007. President Kutin riposted flatly that it was either 2006 or the money was off the table, adding that the byways of UWC's internal governance were of no interest to him.

So, a deal was done and another larger-than-life personality entered the picture. Colin Jenkins is UWC's most eminent Mr Fix-it. He had already been head of UWC Atlantic and UWC Singapore. After helping to get UWC Costa Rica up and running he went on to be instrumental in the development of UWC Maastricht and UWC Dilijan.

You can imagine the apprehension here on campus at these developments. However, Colin took on the job in partnership with his wife Isobel and nervousness quickly turned to enthusiasm. By the time of their second visit Colin and Isobel were so popular that everyone wanted to meet them at the airport, so the whole staff went there in a minibus.

This is not to say that the process of transformation was easy. Negotiations were often difficult and some legal documents required six official stamps, four in London and two here. Costa Rica's governance regulations require a governing board of not more than five, which was smaller than UWC was accustomed to. Mauricio had to apply for the job of head again and won it against a strong field. Furthermore, whereas SOS Children's Villages was a unitary organisation with firm leadership and funding from the top, the UWC movement is a coalition of the willing: a group of autonomous institutions each responsible for its own affairs and funding. That change of culture took time to absorb.

But we got there and the College opened on time. Keith Clark has remarked that, "perhaps because of the presence of the younger students there was an immediate feeling of humility about the College". The opening ceremony, which took place in March of the first year, was a wonderful occasion that included a football match. Queen Noor was at her best and went onto the pitch for a kick around at half-time, much to the amazement of the visiting team.

It was a marvellous expression of joy at what had been achieved against long odds. Many people had contributed to that achievement and many of you here have nurtured the College brilliantly through the subsequent years. I have simply singled out the special roles of Colin

Jenkins, Mauricio Viales and Per Grieg. Per Grieg's support has been unstinting. He gave further financial support beyond his initial commitment and last year his advocacy was instrumental in SOS's generous decision to let the College own the campus, instead of renting it. That will give you far more flexibility for the future.

In my role as chair I have now visited all the UWC institutions. My visit to this College in 2014 was memorable for several reasons. First, I spent a day sitting in on classes and was most impressed by how engaged and engaging teachers and pupils were. Second, I was amazed how young the Board members were. Third, this was the only time I have suffered from food poisoning after eating in a UWC cafeteria – but I was fine by next day!

I went away very proud of this College as a member of the UWC movement.

I began with a quote from Per Grieg. I close with two others. He has said: “in this extremely interesting and fast-moving world of ours, challenges are and will be abundant.” And he added: “Let us try to save the world one child at a time.”

I wish you continued success in your next ten years. *Felicitaciones y muchas gracias*