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United World College in N.M. gifted \$10M

By Robert Nott

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The United World College U.S. rugby team practices on the school grounds. As it prepares to celebrate its 35th anniversary, United World College in Montezuma, N.M., is also celebrating a financial gift of \$10 million.

Photo by Chris Corrie



United World College USA economics teacher Ravi Parashar, center, shares a chuckle with students Matias Muuronen of Finland, left, and Kamy Sharma of India. As it prepares to celebrate its 35th anniversary, United World College in Montezuma, N.M., is also celebrating a financial gift of \$10 million. Photo by Chris Corrie



The historic castle on the United World College USA campus in Montezuma, outside Las Vegas, N.M. The school is home to 235 16 to 19-year-old students typically from more than 75 countries. As it prepares to celebrate its 35th anniversary, United World College in Montezuma, N.M., is also celebrating a financial gift of \$10 million. Photo by Dawn Jernaill

As it prepares to celebrate its 35th anniversary, United World College in Montezuma, N.M., is also celebrating a financial gift of \$10 million.

The family of philanthropist Shelby Davis, in honor of his 80th birthday on March 20, gave the college a matching grant of \$2 million per year for five years, effective June of this year.

Christie Baskett, vice president for advancement for the college, which serves 235 students from 78 countries, including the United States, said the grant comes as the college is working on a new strategic plan that includes a campaign to raise funds for scholarships and capital improvements.

“The \$10 million gift and match that we have to raise will help to build a bridge as we make those plans for the future,” she said. “It will help us start on some of those projects and provide a kind of a cushion.”

The grant money also comes at a time when Baskett sees a need and relevance for United World College, which promotes multicultural understanding, interaction with the surrounding community and sustainability efforts.

“People from any country can become nationalistic and inward-focused, and United World College’s mission is about bringing people together from around the world, people who come from different religions and cultures, and get them to live together and understand one another,” she said. “We always have a Palestinian and an Israeli student here at the same time, and often they are roommates... they get to know what that someone from that other country is about.

“That kind of bridging is very much needed.”

Hugh Somerset, a second-year student from Hong Kong, put it this way: “Where the diversity is achieved is not derived exclusively from where the students are from, but the demographic they are from — national diversity, religious diversity, cultural diversity, social diversity and the list goes on and on and on. It goes from being back at home and saying, ‘I know there are a bunch of strongly religious Catholic people, or strongly religious Muslim people,’ to actually interacting with them, acknowledging their viewpoint and personalities and realizing how similar you are to those people too.”

Davis’ history with the college dates back 20 years, when he first met former college president Philip Geier on a ski trip in Taos. Davis came to visit the campus and, impressed with its world view, gave it a \$45 million scholarship endowment in 1998. Since that time he has bestowed more financial gifts upon the college, giving it money to restore the historic Montezuma Castle on campus, for example.

Davis, in various talks he has given about the United World College network, said it is made up of students whose goal is to go out and “make the world a better place.”

German educator Kurt Hahn, among others, founded the first United World Campus in Wales in 1962. Philanthropist Armand Hammer founded the Montezuma campus in 1982 and it is also known as The Armand Hammer United World College of the American West.

Since that time, a total of 16 world college campuses have opened on five continents. The Montezuma campus serves as a college-preparatory high school that offers an International Baccalaureate diploma, and some of the students are as young as 16 years old.

Students do not apply directly to any one of the United World colleges, but rather to committees in their native countries who then consider the students based on leadership skills, academic achievement and their curiosity about the world.

Of the 235 students currently enrolled, 50 are from America and three of those are from New Mexico, Baskett said. The school operates on an annual budget of about \$11 million, and annual tuition, with room and board, is \$36,750. She said 83 percent of the school's students receive some sort of financial aid, including scholarships.

She said college officials will soon initiate talks with Davis' family to work out the guidelines for the family's \$10 million gift. She said the college will have the right to use the money it raises as a matching grant any way it likes. Scholarship endowments and capital improvements are among the priorities, she said.

Victoria Mora is the current, and fifth, president of United World College in Montezuma.

For more information about the college, visit www.uwc-usa.org/index.cfm.