

## A learning experience

By ALASTAIR PAULIN

---

The news that Nelson is on the shortlist as a site for a United World College jolted me back 24 years, to when I was 17 and staring out a van window at run-down shacks, desert rock formations and tumble-weeds in New Mexico.

I was on my way to the United World College of the American West, an international school for 200 hand-picked teenagers, its aim to foster international understanding and peace. The vision sounded lofty and prestigious; the view was anything but. What had I got myself into?

Two hours north of Albuquerque, the van turned a bend and I was stunned to see a grand Victorian hotel perched incongruously on a hillside. It was a fitting introduction to two topsy-turvy years that were the most formative of my life.

The United World College movement originated in the ideas of German educationalist Kurt Hahn, who founded Outward Bound and other innovative schools. He believed that much could be done to overcome hostility and conflict if young people from different nations could be brought together to learn from each other

Hahn had been invited to address the NATO Defence College where he saw former enemies from several nations working together towards a common goal. He realised how much more could be done to overcome the hostility of the Cold War if young people from different nations could be brought together in a similar way.

He envisaged a college for students aged 16 to 18 who were already grounded in their own cultures but impressionable enough to learn from others. Drawn from all nations, the students would be selected purely on merit and potential, regardless of race, religion, nationality, background or financial means.

The first United World College was Atlantic College which opened in 1962, based at the 12th-century St Donat's Castle in South Wales. It was hailed by the Times of London as "the most exciting experiment in education since the Second World War". By the time I was selected in 1984, there were six colleges, with Atlantic being joined by campuses in Singapore, Canada, Swaziland, Italy and the United States. There are now 12 colleges, with more locations planned, New Zealand possibly Nelson among them.

My UWC was based in a former Santa Fe Railroad hotel in Montezuma, New Mexico, a pinprick of a town in the foothills of the Rockies. My year of 100 students was only the third class to attend the school, which had opened in 1982. It had been funded to the tune of US\$10 million by the oil magnate Dr Armand Hammer, in what was widely believed by the students to be a suck-up gesture to the organisation's then international chairman, Prince Charles.

The remote location even many US students had no idea where New Mexico was deliberate. School leaders wanted students to have few distractions and we were 16km away from the nearest shops in the Motueka-sized town of Las Vegas, New Mexico.

The school was a hothouse. Two hundred 16 to 18-year-olds from 70 different countries were housed in rooms of two in four co-ed dorms. With only one rarely-watched television on campus and before the days of cheap international phone calls, videogames and the Internet, we were each other's world. The arrangement made for all-night deep discussions in the dorm common-rooms and stairwells.

Adding to that atmosphere was the fact that the students tended to be formerly big fish who were now surrounded by equally talented kids. We were head prefects, duxes and student leaders who had been chosen in part for our ability to represent our nation's philosophies as well as be open to others'.

This is not to suggest that the conversation was all high-minded. We were hormone-fuelled teenagers after all, thousands of kilometres away from home. In theory, boys were not allowed in girls' room's after 10.30pm; in practice, the rules of attraction trumped the rules of the school.

Before 10.30pm, we were kept very busy. The academic curriculum was the International Baccalaureate (IB), which is accepted as a qualification for universities worldwide. We were required to study six subjects, three at "A" level, which I found well beyond the depth of seventh-form classes at my small Dunedin high school.

The teachers were passionate and the extra requirements of the IB were demanding but stimulating. I loved the compulsory theory of knowledge classes, essentially a Philosophy 101 course, and the freedom of the extended essay, an independent research dissertation.

Mine was on expat New Zealand poet Fleur Adcock, who I was lucky enough to interview in London after being introduced by Lauris Edmond, who I had accosted at a reading. In retrospect, I can see that they both graciously accommodated a hopelessly naive 18-year-old, but it was thanks to the prodding of my essay advisor that I had the confidence to even attempt original research of that sort. I hadn't known what a unique opportunity such work was until I had completed my English degree at the University of Otago without doing anything as academically rewarding again.

Still, having already qualified for university in New Zealand, I was in the camp that saw the extracurricular requirements as far more important than the class work. We had to sign up for two community service groups and two clubs, which meant four two-hour commitments every week after classes were done.

Rock-climbing and camping trips that were training for the school's well-regarded search-and-rescue squad were highlights, and I loved being a Special Olympics coach for special-needs kids, who relished beating me at indoor bowling. I visited local high schools with the nuclear disarmament group to perform skits about Mutually Assured Destruction, a tough sell in 1984 New Mexico, the heart of the nuclear-industrial complex in Ronald Reagan's America.

But the real meat of the college's idealism came more informally, as Israeli and Palestinian students debated Middle East politics over hamburgers, as black and white South African students met on the soccer pitch, and as Americans defended their country's politics to the rest of the world, who were aghast that the US had just re-elected Reagan.

Having grown up in placid Oamaru and Dunedin, the vibrancy of the arguments and the breadth of my new friends' experiences was eye-opening. Atlantic College student Cate Brett, now editor of the Sunday Star-Times, said she was not fazed by the internationalism, since both her parents were involved in the social justice movement and she had had a "reasonable exposure to other cultures".

Her dorm mates were from Holland, Singapore and Brazil and they were "quickly united by music, food parcels and our hatred of the compulsory 6am swims".

Lukas Sivak won a UWC scholarship to attend Pearson College in Canada in 2001. The Waimea College student from Motueka learnt about the movement from then-principal Rob McMurray, whose daughters Catherine and Gabrielle both attended UWCs.

Lukas found life at Pearson "overwhelmingly stimulating" which he said was "the highest compliment I can give the place". While he found the IB demanding and extra activities time-consuming, he said the real pressure came from trying to fulfil those requirements after talking until four in the morning. Stepping up to handle that kind of pressure is what made him grow up, he reckons.

Sue Barker, who went to Atlantic College in 1982 from the seventh form at Nelson College for Girls, recalled the close bonds formed from intense discussions being "life-changing".

"I was quite reserved, possibly because I was too busy overachieving, but other people said things you just didn't say in Nelson."

She was a typical UWC candidate: at the top of her class, captain of the 1st XI soccer team, selected for nationals in five sports, and "into everything that was going".

But once at Atlantic College, she realised "I had been just coasting at school; doing what was required and doing well". The IB, she said, "taught me to think and I got inspired". And her overall experience was "mind-blowing" despite finding it traumatic to return to her New Zealand community that didn't grasp the significance of her two-year experience.

A front page headline in the Nelson Mail about her selection read "A Great Future Ahead of Her" and certainly on the front end of the experience, as the schools compete to attract the most talented students, there is plenty of talk about the colleges as being laboratories for future world leaders.

But Barker, now a tax lawyer with Buddle Findlay in Christchurch, says "you don't have to come back and be the next Nelson Mandela. It is more about the 'think global, act local' sort of thing".

For a movement with strong roots in the world of social justice, there is more than a whiff of elitism about the colleges. Especially in the formative stages of the movement, leaders focused on making sure the schools were academically elite, and the balance between academic rigour and idealism was the subject of hot debate among my peers.

Cate Brett, a UWC student in 1976-1978, was part of a group of students who pushed for some changes to the curriculum "to try to inject some more meaning into the slogans around 'international peace and understanding' that underpin the UWC movement. Poverty, development, environment and globalisation were issues that were very much alive in the countries participating in the movement but they were not always directly addressed in the colleges themselves."

That sense that you can change the world starting with the world around you is of course a key part of being 17 and idealistic, exactly the mix the colleges are after. And if the ferment that results is not always what teachers may want my college president was probably not delighted to find his house surrounded by placard-waving, chanting students protesting the suspension of two students for illicit drinking that passion is the lifeblood of the UWC movement.

ENDS