

Scholars for Change



United World College students enrich OU as they seek to make a difference in the homes they left behind.

BY STACI ELDER HENSLEY
PHOTOS PROVIDED

The Ugandan landscape may be unfamiliar, but the jaunty crimson and cream shakos and smartly trimmed jackets are unmistakably Sooners. The former University of Oklahoma band uniforms are on smaller shoulders these days, but the pride they instill is as wide as the smiles on the musicians, who march along a dirt path, new horns blaring.

How the OU band uniforms came to students in the Sheema District of Uganda is one of many remarkable stories that spring like hope from the 165 international students who comprise the Davis United World College Scholars Program at OU.

Launched in 2000 by businessman Shelby Davis and co-founded by leading education expert and former Fulbright Scholar Philip Geier, the goal of the Davis UWC Scholars Program is to offer exceptional students from around the world the chance to obtain their education at American colleges and universities. To this end, UWC has become the largest privately funded international scholarship program in the world, providing each student \$20,000 a year through four years of college.

OU is among 90 higher education institutions around the country participating in the global initiative. Further, the university boasts the highest number of Davis Scholars of all 90 schools, and for the third straight year it has earned the prestigious Davis Cup in recognition of that achievement.

The distinction is even more impressive when you consider that OU is vying for these students against the likes of Yale, Princeton, Brown, Duke, MIT and other high-profile universities, says Craig Hayes, director of international admissions and recruitment, who has overseen OU's UWC Scholars program since the beginning.

The Underlying Vision

The Davis UWC Scholars Program is built on two principles – that promising future leaders from a broad range of cultures should have greater educational opportunities, and that such opportunities should take place at American schools. Going further, its goal is to boost global thinking and provide all college students with a more internationally oriented undergraduate experience.

Participating scholars are selected through highly competitive programs in their home countries. Once accepted, students must complete their final two years of high school at one of 15 UWC schools around the globe. From there, UWC and



individual university advisers work closely with the students to help them determine where they want to pursue higher education.

Why They Choose OU

OU's involvement came about through the efforts of alumni Jim and JoAnn Holden. Jim Holden was a business partner of Shelby Davis, and the two worked together early in their careers. Decades later, when Davis began to support the UWC program he persuaded his longtime friend to get involved. Only Ivy League universities and small liberal arts colleges were participating at the time, and Holden suggested that its reach be expanded into public universities as well.

With the support of OU President David L. Boren and other key figures in the international programs and admissions offices, OU enrolled its first four Davis scholars in the fall of 2008. The class consisted of two Americans, one student from Cambodia and another from Kazakhstan, Hayes says.

From that modest start, the university has steadily climbed to its current 165 Davis UWC scholars, who together represent more than 60 countries. Hayes, who originally was part of the supervisory team for OU's National Merit Scholars program, transitioned over to the Davis Scholars. He and his two-member staff provide emotional and practical support, and Hayes's devotion to these students is evident.

"The program aligns beautifully with President Boren's idea of globalization and bringing in all cultures," he says. "These



Kendra Sy, a Davis scholar from the Philippines, gets her hands dirty while making T-shirt designs during the annual UWC Day on OU's Norman campus.

students, and they reach out electronically as well. Prior to the Davis scholars program, Hayes says, the university did not actively recruit international students for its undergraduate programs.

"Something that really changed the game for us was in 2009, when we invited all the UWC counselors to visit the university," he says. "We had 12 counselors from nine schools who visited over three days, and that's really when we became legitimate for them. They got a sense of the family that the

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Hayes says OU appeals to the students for several reasons. First, as a public university it offers a much wider choice of degree programs than the smaller, liberal arts colleges. Second, it's much less expensive than the Ivy League schools, and often – especially in fields like engineering – the programs are as strong or stronger than those at higher-profile schools. Third, the university provides an extremely strong support network for the students before, during and after they attend OU.

OU staff also travel to UWC high schools to recruit stu-

dent, and the full support that we offer these students."

Strike Up the Band

One of the most heartwarming stories to emerge from the UWC program is the story of Darius Aruho. Originally from Uganda, the junior chemical engineering student has made quite an impact in his two years in Norman. As a freshman he was awarded the university's "Creativity in Motion" prize through the College of Arts and Sciences, and he used the \$10,000 to purchase marching band instruments for students



Left - OU Davis UWC scholars Nosimilo Khumalo (left) of Swaziland, Flavio Moreno of Guatemala, and Neira Kadic of Bosnia-Herzegovina, show off their handiwork during UWC Day 2015.

Below - Flavia Moreno's Project for Peace supplied purified water for 260 families in Guatemala's Chiyuc Village. The UWC program offers outstanding students the chance to earn an education at an American university while promoting global thinking and action.



in the Ugandan district of Sheema. Funds from another grant were used to build a rural schoolhouse.

The following year, while attempting to find funds to purchase uniforms for the band students, he learned that OU's Pride of Oklahoma was replacing its uniforms. Through Aruho's efforts, along with other staff and friends of the university, OU's retiring band uniforms made their way to

Uganda. In their honor, the Sheema Pride Band now plays "Boomer Sooner" as part of its repertoire.

"In one year, Darius competed for and won \$30,000 in grant funding to use to positively impact young people back in his home country," Hayes says. "Most of us will never raise \$30,000 for any cause over the course of our entire lifetimes."

Becoming a UWC Scholar "really changes how you see the



UWC student Darius Aruho visits the site of his Project for Peace in the Sheema district of Uganda. Aruho has raised more than \$30,000 to change lives in his home country during just three years as a UWC scholar.

world,” Aruho says. “It takes [these ideas] from an abstract concept to really making a difference.”

While Aruho may be the most well-known Davis scholar, the joy in working with these students is that all of them are exceptional, and each one is spearheading projects that will improve people’s lives around the world over the long term, Hayes says.

One such student is Orhan Roksa, who hails from Mostar, a cultural center in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Now a sophomore studying mechanical engineering, Roksa says his American and OU experiences have been nothing but positive. Being a UWC scholar, he says, has been life-changing.

“Along with great education, one learns to be compassionate, a critical thinker and starts appreciating life and involvement in the community,” Roksa says. “The program promotes peace through education, which I find the most powerful way toward a better future for all of us, and it provides us with the tools every individual needs in order to be successful.”

Projects for Peace

Created in 2007 by Shelby Davis in honor of his mother, Kathryn, UWC’s “Projects for Peace” is designed to encour-

age the creation of unique, sustainable projects that help people around the globe resolve conflict and create opportunities for entrepreneurship. The projects are funded through grants, school awards and individual fundraising efforts, and any college student can apply, whether or not they are a UWC scholar.

OU students to date have developed such unique peace projects as:

- Creating a video, “Nations of Peace,” featuring interviews with the leaders of the top five most peaceful nations in the world.
- Building a water purification system for a local village in Guatemala.
- Establishing a pig farm in Swaziland, to provide income for local women.
- Creating a city park to serve residents of one of the largest slums in Cartagena, Colombia.
- Creating a leadership camp attended by some 200 underprivileged Colombian children.
- Hosting a two-week art therapy creativity camp for 60 Kenyan children.
- Creating a “She’s 13” program to educate local middle school-aged children about the dangers of child sex



OU's 2015 Davis UWC scholars stand in force behind JoAnn Holden, Gale Davis, Shelby Davis, President Boren, First Lady Molly Shi Boren, Phil Geier and the late Jim Holden to celebrate OU receiving the Davis Cup. OU has won the coveted award three years in a row for enrolling the largest number of UWC students in the nation.

trafficking. (Oklahoma has one of the highest rates in the country, due to its location at the junction of three major interstate highways.)

One of the most unique projects is Aruho's latest, which was the purchase of sewing machines and other materials to create inexpensive and reusable feminine hygiene products for women and girls in his native Uganda. It might seem an odd subject to address, until one learns that disposable products are too expensive for most families and adolescent girls can miss up to 20 percent of their education as a result of not being able to leave the house.

By purchasing the sewing machines and putting systems in place for a steady supply of materials, Aruho's project is not just helping women and girls; it's also providing a source of sustainable income for the community.

The Davis Cup

OU has not only won the Davis Cup for the past three consecutive years, it's the only public university ever to receive the cup. Earning the Davis Cup has also provided an opportunity to tell the scholars' stories to a broader audience, Hayes says. "I love putting people in contact with our students. They

tell the story, and they *are* the story."

Going further, the Davis UWC scholars are making their mark on the broader OU campus, as many of them are winning outstanding student awards and going on to obtain master's and doctoral degrees.

"Shelby Davis describes these students as 'change agents,' and the whole reason is that we expect they will make a difference," Hayes says. "I would argue that there is a distinct UWC language instilled in them, a love of peace. Darius is a shining example, but all of them are shining examples.

"When you spend time around these students, you can't help but think, 'What am I doing with *my* life?'" he adds. "You see the grace with which they overcome challenges and the passion with which they meet challenges. It's not just culture – what I think the university learns from these students is the passion to change the world. That sounds cheesy, but it's true. There's the entire OU fabric, and the UWC students are now firmly woven into it. And we're just getting started."

Staci Elder Hensley is a freelance writer living in Norman.



To watch the Sheema Pride Band in action, go to our online edition at soonermag.oufoundation.org.