

An interview with Laurence Nodder

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Laurence Nodder, current Head of Waterford Kamhlaba in Swaziland, will lead the German UWC Initiative and, subject to that project passing through UWC’s various stages of approval, become the founding Head of the new College. It is planned to open as Robert Bosch College in Freiburg in September 2014. Laurence will move with his family to Freiburg in the late summer of 2012.

Laurence, you will settle in Freiburg this late summer. You will change schools, country, continents and culture and you will be an African in Europe. How do you feel about this transition?

Apart from a 5-month sabbatical based at UWC-USA, I have lived all my life in Southern Africa. Some of my cultural background is European. For instance I have a deep enjoyment of baroque and classical music and my favourite composers mostly are from Central Europe – Bach, Mozart, Beethoven. Yet other aspects of me are African, for instance I try to treasure a sense of ‘Ubuntu’. According to Archbishop Desmond Tutu, “ubuntu speaks particularly about the fact that you can't exist



Laurence Nodder, founding Head of the Robert Bosch College

as a human being in isolation. It speaks about our interconnectedness. You can't be human all by yourself, and when you have this quality – Ubuntu – you are known for your generosity. We think of ourselves far too frequently as just individuals, separated from one another, whereas you are connected and what you do affects the whole world. When you do well, it spreads out; it is for the whole of humanity”. The best of what it means to be African fits in well with the notion of community and responsibility that are at the centre of a UWC experience. What I discovered at my sabbatical at UWC-USA was that I could fall in love with, identify with and respect another place, another community of people, another society, even though there were things that I might find unfamiliar and even at times frustrating.

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It will only be my wife Debbie and I who move to Freiburg, since our three children are attending Universities and Colleges. And I hope that when Debbie and I move to Freiburg, people will find us open

to a new, German, way of life, willing to engage, willing to become responsible citizens of that city, of Baden-Württemberg, of Germany. I am confident that if we are open, engaged, willing to be responsible citizens, we will receive a warm welcome and be made to feel at home. I am looking forward to Freiburg, because it will be an exciting professional challenge in a fabulous location. And Debbie is looking forward in particular to the move since she is an artist. It will be great for her to move to a place where there is a wider participation in the arts and many possibilities to explore her deep interest in that.

You have visited Freiburg for a couple of days in January 2012: What was your impression of the new location for a potential UWC?

When I visited Freiburg things really fell into place. Before my visit I had just seen the plans, but then it all made sense: The Kartaus and the grounds, Freiburg and the surrounding villages

and the focus of the region on sustainability. Christian Hodeige also took me to the neighbouring villages and it seemed to me that this is a part of the world with a sense of history, rootedness and productivity. I talked to a winegrower, who explained to me how many winegrowers are moving away from huge commercial agriculture to smaller but personalised productions. And this theme of sustainability seems to be present everywhere in the region.

Before, you talked about the College in Freiburg being a professional challenge for you: Why are you interested in this challenge?

Every principal dreams of the opportunity to build a college from scratch. You are not given the compromises that other people have made in the years before. You start with a fresh sheet of people. And you are working out with people, both the adults - the Board, advisory committees, wider society- and of course with the students, what could represent an ideal community. That is the challenge and the promise that this project holds. In ten years time I

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will be able to look at what is there and say: I had a strong role in the making of that. And that is a wonderful challenge in one's life.

Of course the road won't always be even: Part of the upcoming challenges will be, that even though people will come to the College with a sense of hope and

idealism, we all come from different backgrounds and we will have competing ideas about what it should look like. But it is this process of engagement with others that is difficult but rewarding as people work things out. And something special of course at Freiburg will be the focus on sustainability. Every UWC embraces the notion of that in some way or the other. But none of them have been founded with an eye on it as a key issue. To build that in from the very core rather than a philosophy that gets tagged on, will be very exciting. Waterford Khamlaba for example was founded as the first non-racial school in Southern Africa. And that is different than bringing non-racialism in as an add-on. A model with an add-on is always a slightly compromised model.

What does this focus on sustainability mean to you? How are you planning on approaching it?

In recent years more and more people are coming to realise that the manner in which we as humans are living on this planet earth is not sustainable – our environment, our societies and in several instances our economies are in grave danger of collapse in the not-too-distant future. Yet much of the discourse around these issues is shallow and dishonest: for instance so often we are told that the use of certain products and technologies - rather than others - is "good" for the earth, whereas the truth is that in many instances our use of these products and technologies is only slightly less damaging, a more complicated truth.

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As UWC we must be particularly careful: if our carbon consumption matters, the reality is that while there is an incredible amount to be gained from bringing together people from different parts of the world and people with different lived realities, our carbon impact per capita is higher than almost any other educational organization. We can justify this if we as UWC pioneer, within schooling, with an honest discourse, if through searching we learn to ask the important questions, if through our community we grow a deep commitment to exploring sustainable ways to live, to ordering our societies and our economies. If we take the concept of 'sustainability' primarily as a marketing slogan, as today's fashionable concept, we who consume so many resources and are given so much opportunity will have failed our generation. If we are willing to probe deeply and to live consequentially, UWC can make a profound impact in the world.

Laurence, the discussion in the UWC community always also involves the question if we need another College in Europe. What is your stand on that?

Lots of people ask do we need another UWC in Germany. In my opinion, in an ideal world every school would be a UWC, because the principles behind a UWC would lead to a peaceful world and if we approach it correctly to a sustainable manner of living. The question shouldn't be in my opinion if we need another College in Europe, but rather why there aren't enough Colleges in other parts of the world. And the answer to that question really is funding. In many countries there is a problem with funding, and only through the remarkable partnership with the Robert Bosch Stiftung and the collaboration with the federal state of Baden-Württemberg, B.Braun Corporation and the City of Freiburg has this opportunity arisen. Bringing these bodies together has now opened up the opportunity to a UWC in Germany. And I hope for similar times when opportunities arise that make a UWC available in West, North and East Africa or South America, because these areas are missing out on the opportunity of a UWC. But that is the beauty of the Robert Bosch College, because it will bring new money and new places into UWC. It won't be simply a thinning out of the existing opportunities, but every year another 100 students will experience a UWC.

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You have been committed to UWC as the Head of Waterford for thirteen years now. With all your experience in education, why do you think UWCs are needed nowadays? Many IB schools and international schools are being founded that also offer programmes with a focus on IB and service. Why should we widen the movement?

You got me on one of my favourite topics. Atlantic College 50 years ago started on a particular response. At the time it was founded, the conflict especially in Europe and North America was between nations that relatively recently had been at war and where now experiencing a cold war. The same is the case with Waterford Kamhlaba. The threat to peace at that time in Southern Africa was apartheid, because people were forced to be separated. So these two Colleges both started with a need to peace and their response fitted the situation we found ourselves in. 50 years on some of those threats still remain. But in my opinion the threat to peace today mostly means the division between people and between different components of society. UWC gives you the real opportunity to have a much clearer idea of the root causes. We should grow our National Committee system to not select people simply representing nations, but the tensions in and across our own society. That makes it possible to re-examine the world and respond to the threats of peace today.

Those threats today are also the irresponsible use of the resources of the world or that we are taking from the world in a way that is not sustainable. And we can address this in our selection and in our curriculum. For example: In one way we could select students from countries and parts of countries where there is little awareness about sustainability and bring those students to a College, where those students gain a much deeper and profound understanding and can go back to their communities as agents of change. For example: The closest town in South Africa to Waterford Kamhlaba is Carolina where there is a new coal mine. Acid has leached from the coal mine into the ground water. Carolina is now in a position where it has no drinking water. So every day trucks supply the people with 5 litres water each. Imagine we would give a scholarship to a student from South Africa, say from a town like Carolina, and that student through their studies could come back and have a role to play in that community.

Interview by Janna Pinsker

More on Laurence Nodder...

On graduation from university Laurence Nodder refused conscription into the Apartheid South African Defence Force. On the day he was due to report for military service in January 1982 he left South Africa to teach in a small, independent school in Mafeteng, Lesotho, where after a short while he became principal. Kingsgate High School served baSotho, refugees from the townships of South Africa (including refugees under the care of the UNHCR), and a few expatriate children. In January 1986 he moved to the Sekukhune area in South Africa, an area deemed to be a 'homeland' by the Apartheid Government, and helped re-establish as a non-racial school a school that had been closed down in the 1950s with the passing of the infamous Bantu Education Act. St Mark's College served students from the surrounding areas and townships as far away as Mamelodi and Soweto.

By 1993 the Apartheid Government was no longer prosecuting conscientious objectors, and Nodder was able to take up the principalship of St Gregory College, an Anglican boarding school in the KwaZulu Natal Midlands. These were challenging times, not only because of conflict between white and black, but also (often State-sponsored) black-on-black violence.

In 1999 Nodder was appointed as Principal of Waterford Kamhlaba UWC of Southern Africa. Within UWC Nodder has championed the ideal that 'diversity' within UWCs needs to stretch to beyond national diversities if UWC is to make its fullest impact to make 'education a force to unite people, nations and cultures for peace and a sustainable future'. Nodder has stressed that UWCs need to select students representing the tensions among and between peoples and societies. He has championed the selection of orphans and those from the bottom economic sectors, together with those who have grown up in more fortunate circumstances.

Kingsgate High, St Mark's College, St Gregory College and UWC Waterford Kamhlaba have all shared a vision for a non-racial, democratic society, and a determination to create and maintain this as an educational ethos. Nodder remains humbled and inspired by Nelson Mandela's closing words at the 'Rivonia' Trial in 1964 where he was facing the death sentence: "I have fought against white domination, and I have fought against black domination. I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportunities. It is an ideal, which I hope to live for and to achieve. But if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die."

Nodder's commitment to society finds expression in several areas beyond UWC Waterford Kamhlaba: he has served on a number of school and church boards, he currently serves on the Board of 'Young Heroes', an NGO that provides funding directly to orphans for food and education and access to health services, recently represented the Swaziland Federation of Employers and Chamber of Commerce at an ILO meeting in taking forward the fight against child labour in southern and eastern Africa, and is an active member of Rotary.