

UNC has brought the world to us
The Chapel Hill Herald

Column by Michelle Lewis : Mar 5, 2008

When I came to Chapel Hill as a college student in 1981, it seemed like a small, sleepy Southern town with a pretty darn good university at its epicenter. It was much like the town in which I grew up -- Princeton, N.J.

But Princeton and Chapel Hill were, in fact, very different at that time because Princeton had a rich concentration of foreign students and faculty. Also, the fact that New York City was so close by meant that the city's worldly and international flare became a part of my growing up. If we wanted to go to a museum or a zoo, we went to New York City. The sights, sounds, tastes and smells of New York City, and the various cultures that contributed to the potpourri that is New York, all were familiar to me.

Don't get me wrong, I liked how small and cozy my experience was at UNC, but I did feel like I had been transported to a town that was far removed from the larger world.

When I returned to Chapel Hill in 2000 after a decade of being an international attorney in Washington, D.C., I expected Chapel Hill to still be the same small, sleepy town. And although there had been some changes, it did still feel very removed from the world.

Yet something has happened in the past eight years that renders that description no longer true. Chapel Hill has determinedly become more worldly. And, as with almost all things Chapel Hillian, the source of this change has been the university.

When I use the word "determinedly," I mean it specifically. Chancellor James Moeser set out to make UNC an institution on the world map. And he succeeded. As a result, UNC's prominence in international academics has risen exponentially. More and more foreign students are coming to Chapel Hill for their degrees. Foreign faculty members also are increasing. Course offerings with an international focus now appear in almost every academic field.

UNC's Center for International Studies has strong, well-regarded offerings for students but it also has a determined and strong outreach program to the community at large. I'm talking not only about the CIS lecture series, but also its International Friendship Program and Carolina Navigators program.

Through the International Friendship Program, local residents have an opportunity to befriend an international student attending UNC. The program encourages the "host family" to get together with the international student every month or so to show the student about life in the U.S. and to learn more about that student's life in his/her country. My family feels very grateful to be participating in this program. Our student, who is from Taiwan, has enriched our lives and broadened my children's horizons.

The Carolina Navigators program also provides opportunities for local residents to meet with foreign students. Specifically, the Carolina Navigators program provides K-12 schools with a database of foreign UNC students who want to teach school-age children about their countries. My children, and other Chapel Hill Homeschoolers, have enjoyed hearing presentations by UNC students regarding countries as diverse as Nicaragua, Tanzania and Egypt.

But this is just the tip of the iceberg. UNC truly seems to be infused with a genuine, organic international pulse. Take, for example, UNC's award-winning program Carolina for Kibera ("CFK"), which was named a Time Magazine "Hero of Global Health." CFK volunteers help fight poverty and prevent violence through community-based development in the Kibera slum of Nairobi, Kenya. Later this month, when CFK volunteers meet with students in the Chapel Hill Homeschoolers, our children, who are so cozy here in Chapel Hill and Carrboro, will begin to understand in palpable terms how different life is for children half a world away in Kibera.

Lending strong support to UNC's global pulse is UNC's performing arts program. The line-up of international artists in this year's UNC Memorial Hall schedule is astounding. A quick glance just at the dance performance offerings -- with companies from Cambodia, India and Uganda -- says it all. But once again, this panoply of international offerings was determinedly deliberate.

Chancellor Moeser hired Emil Kang to be UNC's first executive director of the arts because he knew Kang's vision would be big -- and broad. Moeser was right. Kang has done nothing less than bring the world to Chapel Hill. And Kang is making sure it reaches our kids. In April, local school students will be treated to a matinee performance just for them by the Spirit of Uganda dance company.

And let's not forget the contribution of the Ackland Art Museum. The Ackland's collection of art work from around the world is impressive. And their educators do an excellent job of making our children understand and appreciate the cultures that created these works, even though the artists are removed from us by not only oceans and continents, but also, sometimes, by millennia. So do I long for New York City, as I sit here in cozy Chapel Hill? Not one bit, because Carolina has brought the world to Chapel Hill.

Chapel Hill resident Michelle Lewis has been an international attorney, a director of political campaigns and a community volunteer. Now she devotes most of her time to homeschooling her two children. Readers can contact her at michellealisonlewis@yahoo.com or c/o The Chapel Hill Herald, 106 Mallette St., Chapel Hill, NC 27516.