Speech to International Studies Graduating Class of 2015

“What do International Studies Graduates have in Common?”

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Greetings International Studies Graduates, class of 2015! And welcome family, loved ones and friends.

When I was asked to be the alumni speaker, I started wondering: What do we - international studies graduates - have in common? I would like explore this question, first by sharing a little of my own story.

My interest in the wider world was triggered by the year I spent in Hawaii following graduation from college. Besides the ocean and beautiful beaches, I was enthralled by the diversity of people I found there.

I returned to the mainland to attend law school, and took all of the classes I could on international law. Instead of doing a summer clerkship in law like most law students, I chose to spend a summer in France studying French. That experience drew me further into the dream of living and working abroad.

Back at law school, I approached my international law professor about international work. Instead of encouraging and guiding me, he told me my dream was “not realistic.”

Disappointed, and absent other sources of support, I dropped the idea. I moved to Oregon and opened a law practice here in Eugene.

But the dream of an international career wouldn’t leave me. And after having practiced law for eight years, gotten married and had two children I decided – with my wife’s support – to take the leap. I entered the International Studies Program pursuing an MA in international development.

During my studies I was attracted to the United Nations by its core mission: bringing countries together to solve global problems. That simple idea resonated strongly with me. It still does.
After graduation, and following two internships with the UN, I got a job as a consultant working on international environmental law with the UN’s Environment Programme in Nairobi, Kenya.

I was lucky: they were short-handed, and I was asked to draft a new treaty to tackle environmental problems caused by hazardous wastes, and jump-start the inter-governmental negotiations. My experience organizing and participating in four rounds of negotiations was exciting, and rewarding.

After two years I joined the UN secretariat in Vienna, Austria working for the UN Office on Drugs and Crime. I stayed for 14 years, and had the chance to do some very different types of work:

• Advising countries on their national drug control strategies;
• Providing legal assistance on pharmacy legislation to countries in West Africa; and
• Managing UNODC’s strategic planning, budget and project evaluation activities.

Our children grew up in Vienna, attended a French school, learned German on the playground and, to this day, they cannot turn down a plate of Weiner Schnitzel, Sauerkraut and Semmelknodel. Most importantly, our family became very tight-knit.

After the children had grown and returned to the US for college, I was offered a job with UN’s Programme on HIV-AIDS in Geneva, Switzerland.

We lived across the border in France. My job was to coordinate preparation of UNAID’s joint work plan and budget on the HIV-AIDS work of UNAIDS and its cosponsoring agencies which included the UN Development Programme, UNICEF, the World Bank and others.

We spent six years in France and loved it. The food, the language, the people, and watching the Tour de France race through the French countryside.

We took retirement to Eugene in 2009 to be near our family, and I was happy to be able to start teaching as an adjunct instructor in the International Studies Department. Probably because of my own experience, I particularly enjoy advising students on their career plans.
During my 22 years with the UN, I loved working with people from different countries and cultures on a daily basis. And I felt privileged and proud to be part of something bigger than myself that I believed in.

I also treasure the memories of the places I visited and people I met, such as:

- A midnight night dinner with colleagues in Caracas, Venezuela, after having worked late preparing for the next day’s treaty negotiations;
- Seeing first-hand how poor villagers in the Shan State in northern Myanmar were being oppressed by local warlords;
- Explaining to top law enforcement and health officials in Indonesia - who were meeting together for the very first time - why they needed to work together to help drug abusers, not just lock them up.

Did my international studies degree help me in my career? Absolutely! First, I had the technical knowledge on development issues I needed to do the job.

Equally important, I believe was able to understand other peoples’ points of view, or an unfamiliar context, quicker and more accurately than many of my UN colleagues, which gave me a big advantage.

I’m sure almost every one of you can tell the story of what triggered your interest in international studies. Maybe it was being brought up in a family with close ties to another country; or attending an international high school; or seeing first-hand the challenges faced by immigrants. For some, it was a recognition that you could get a better understanding of an issue you care deeply about such as:

- Why is it that so many pregnant mothers and babies in sub-Saharan Africa don’t survive what should be life’s most fulfilling experience?
- Why is there so much devastation from earthquakes in Pakistan or Nepal - and so relatively little from comparable quakes in California?
Why is it that the United States has such high levels of poverty amidst great wealth compared to many other countries?

Whatever it was, a door opened for us to another place, another point of view. In other words: *we are a curious bunch, open to new ideas and the wider world.*

To curiosity and openness I would add *compassion.* Why? Because when you get to know people from different cultures, religious traditions or social and economic circumstances *with* a spirit of curiosity and openness, empathy and compassion naturally emerge. That’s why so many of us pursue careers in public service, NGOs or socially responsible approaches to business.

We are also are not afraid to take risks. I am not necessarily referring to physical risk, but rather that we are ready to get out of our comfort zones, experience new ways of living, and question our own prejudices and viewpoints. This is a huge advantage not only in international work but also in living life wherever you are.

Finally, although our graduates tend to have strong, altruistic values, we are not naïve. We a *realistic* group, knowing better how the world *really* works – we are not bound by the narrow perspective of ideology, left or right.

So, you leave the U of O not only with the *technical* knowledge you need for your future career, but also with a *practical toolkit* of people-centered principles and skills which will serve you well.

We international studies graduates have a lot in common. Remember: You are part of this community whether you stay in Eugene or find yourself in Washington, Bogota or a village in Zimbabwe after graduation. Keep in touch with each other and with the department.

The next chapter of your story is waiting to be written. What will it be?