

Media Relations

Cultural Stages Initiative Promotes World Cultures Through Drama And Dance

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DURHAM, N.H. – As part of the 50th anniversary of the Paul Creative Arts Center, the University of New Hampshire announces a new project, "Cultural Stages: The Woodward International Drama and Dance Initiative." Comprised of an international playwright in residence program and the Woodward International Playwriting Prize, the initiative is designed to promote a greater understanding of world cultures through drama and dance. The project is funded by Ellis Woodward, UNH Class of '74.

"What is exciting about this program is the benefits go far beyond our theatre and dance students," explains David Kaye, associate professor of theatre. "The productions themselves will then offer the entire campus community the opportunity to learn and experience exposure to new cultures through the excitement of live performance. Guest artists will visit classes around campus, as well as taking part in speaking engagements in the community and around the state."

"Ellis's gift really exemplifies what I call transformative philanthropy," says UNH President Mark Huddleston. "It touches not one or a few, but many people. Perhaps the greatest gift we can provide to our students is to expand their knowledge and compassion for other cultures around the globe. This will do that, and the impact will be everlasting."

Woodward is involved at UNH in many capacities, including as a new member of the UNH Foundation Board of Directors and as a mentor for students in the Pathways program. "UNH is where I got my start, and where I've ended up," he says. Where he's been in between has, in some ways, led him back to the Durham campus.

Woodward and Kaye began working together in earnest after Kaye's return from Ghana last fall. Woodward, it turned out, also had a keen interest in West Africa, and wanted to discuss opportunities associated with Kaye's trip. "What Ellis was really interested in was exposing UNH students to another culture, and was particularly interested in doing this through performing arts," Kaye explains. "We brainstormed, and he asked me to come in with a 'Rolls Royce' proposal and, just to be safe, a 'Ford' idea as well. So I came back with two proposals.

After Woodward reviewed both, he wanted to fund both. "That was the moment my jaw dropped," Kaye recalls. "That was the first time when I actually allowed myself to think, *Wow, we could really make something extraordinary happen here at UNH!*"

During President Jimmy Carter's term as president, Woodward headed up his advance team. When you ask him how got there, he will tell you UNH. And how he ended up in Africa was because of Carter. And how Woodward ended up back at UNH is because of Africa.

"When I was a student at UNH, I saw all the candidates running for president," Woodward says. "After hearing Jimmy Carter speak, I asked Bob Craig (former professor of political science) if I should join his New Hampshire primary campaign."

Craig told him sure – Carter would never win the presidency but it would be a good experience to be "inside politics." Long story short, Ellis went on to the national campaign after Carter won the New Hampshire Primary, and was asked to be part of Carter's administration when he was elected President.

One of his most memorable experiences was traveling to Africa with Carter, the first U.S. president to go there. Woodward returned to Africa several times over the years, teaching and assisting with volunteer programs. When he retired six years ago, he settled along the coast of Maine and reconnected with his

 
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alma mater, UNH.

He established the Fund for African Development at UNH, which allows students to implement health education, infrastructure, and agriculture projects in Africa through the International Research Opportunities Program (IROP). "The opportunity for a student to spend time in Africa will change lives," he says, "and Africa will always be a part of their lives." He stays in touch with the students who have benefited from his fund and says "it's the most exciting thing I could possibly imagine."

This new initiative, "Cultural Stages," begins next January and will offer students the unique opportunity to experience different cultures through the development and performance of drama and dance, to see the world through the eyes of the characters they portray, the dances they dance, and the songs they sing.

The International Playwright in Residence program commissions the writing of a play that will be reflective of the selected playwright's culture. These plays may examine aspects of the historical, social, economic, political and religious environments, as well as artistic and other traditions that have shaped this culture. The playwright will spend a semester in residence at UNH to develop the play which will then be produced by the UNH Department of Theatre and Dance, and performed by UNH students. The first playwright to take part in the program will be Mohammed Ben Abdullah, one of the most published and produced playwrights in West Africa.

The Woodward International Playwriting Prize, which will be given for the first time in 2014, will promote a deeper understanding of international cultures through a competition for plays addressing relevant themes, resulting in a full production of the play at UNH.

Kaye believes UNH is the first in the nation to have a program like this. "It is such a unique opportunity for our students and I feel very strongly that those in theatre and higher education will take notice. Any of the plays that get published will make clear that the original production was mounted by the UNH Department of Theatre and Dance through the Cultural Stages Woodward International Drama and Dance Initiative. That's a big deal."

The University of New Hampshire, founded in 1866, is a world-class public research university with the feel of a New England liberal arts college. A land, sea, and space-grant university, UNH is the state's flagship public institution, enrolling more than 12,200 undergraduate and 2,200 graduate students.

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