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Closing Ceremony 2021

Address by the Rettore William Turner

Good afternoon graduating second-year students, first-year students, teachers and administration staff. Good morning, good afternoon and good evening to parents, relatives and all others connected to the College who are watching this Closing Ceremony online today from all over the world. This ceremony celebrates the graduation of the academic cohort 2019-21 and represents the end of their educational journey here in Duino. It has been some journey for this group of students. When they arrived in August 2019, none of us would have expected that we would be finishing the two-year experience as we are today or that we would have faced the fourteen months of enormous challenges that Covid-19 has brought us. Nonetheless, it is important that today is seen as a celebration of what they have achieved as they move on to the next chapter in their lives.

I would like to start my speech today by giving some thanks to all the people and organisations that have made this academic year possible. UWC Adriatic exists for its students, for the UWC mission, and without the unfailing commitment of our teachers, administrators and many supporting agencies outside the college, this year would not have happened. The staff, in particular, have made many personal sacrifices to support the College and deliver an in-person educational experience to our students when many young people across the world have been resigned to learning online or at home for most of the past year. As Rettore, I am incredibly grateful to them for everything they have done and would like to take a moment to applaud them all.

I would also like to give my heartfelt thanks on behalf of the College to the people and institutions of Italy for their continued generosity in supporting UWC Adriatic. In particular, we remain, as ever, especially grateful to the Friuli Venezia Giulia Region for our buildings that have been the students' home since they arrived, and the significant number of scholarships offered to students from countries around the world, especially those in states of tension and conflict - as well as from the FVG region.

Others of you are here on full scholarships thanks to the contribution of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Others of you are fully funded by the activities of your own National Committees; by donations from UWC alumni and other contributors to the college Annual Fund; and there are those of you sponsored by different foundations and corporate or individual donors. Many of you also receive pocket money each year through the generous sponsorship of the Premio alla Bontà Hazel Marie Cole. Please never forget all their generosity and think about how, in time, you can strive to be as generous as those who have provided you with this chance in life. And remember that the concept of giving back is fundamental to the success of the UWC mission

This ceremony is also an opportunity for our community to say some farewells to staff leaving at the end of this academic year.

Joanna Wdzienkonska has been the College Librarian since 1991 and in that time has overseen a number of changes in the library. Outside the Library, she acted in staff and student shows, supervised project weeks to different destinations in Europe and lived as residential staff in Palazzine with her husband Paul, who taught at the College for many years. She will now join Paul in retirement.

Steve Coughlin joined the College in 2015 as a teacher of English, TOK and the IB coordinator. Since then he moved on to become Director of Student Life and more recently Deputy Head (Pastoral). In that time, as I am sure you will all agree, he has been a pillar of our community. Someone who always has time for others be they students or staff. Someone who is a great teacher. Someone who cares for our whole community. He has shouldered significant responsibilities this year as we have navigated the College through the pandemic, doing so with great assurance and professionalism whilst maintaining his witty sense of humour. Our College will miss him greatly.

We also say farewell to Jill Harkness, Steve's wife. Jill joined Steve in Duino in 2016, the year before they got married. Jill began working at the College in 2017 leading research workshops, and social services. Later she took over the role of Head Library and Learning Resources, as well as being a University Counsellor. Always upbeat and positive, Jill has been a great support to students in her time here and we will miss her in the library next year. We wish her, Steve, their young son Joe who was born here last year and their dog Mirko all the very best as they return to Canada and begin their next chapter at Stanstead College in Québec.

We also say arrivederci to Dima Trendafilova and Maurizio Torchiana who both head off on sabbaticals next year. We wish them well for their time away from the College and look forward to their return.

So now to our second-year students. Like you, I arrived in Duino in August 2019 and your two years here have been my entire experience at the College. What a two years it has been! Your first five months were a normal start to life as a student in Duino, as you embraced the UWC educational model, but then the pandemic arrived. The College shut down in February 2020 and you finished your first year online. You returned in August of last year, overcoming quarantine periods and the uncertainty of international travel. Since then we have faced many restrictions as a community and your education here has not been what you expected, wanted or deserved. With much regret, we have become used to a new way of confined living, which has been very hard. This new way of living has taken its toll in many ways on our wellbeing and mental health, leaving life to be a constant challenge for us all. At times it has been a real struggle and we all desperately long for a return to normality.

However, *Personal Challenge* is one of the UWC values. As a community we have risen to the personal and collective challenges the pandemic has thrown at us. We have tried to keep as much of the educational programme going as there would be in normal times. With the exception of an eight-day period, we have had in-person lessons throughout the year. CAS activities have run in a modified fashion. Students have run cultural events and focuses, and organised amazing shows. Project Week took place in the comune of Duino-Aurisina earlier this month. So, when considering how our education has continued, there is a sense of pride for our community and that, despite the

circumstances, students have been able to continue their learning. Staff have shown tremendous dedication and professionalism in order to make this happen, but it is the resilience, determination and grit of students that has driven this forward. You are the ones who have studied hard, shown commitment to your CAS activities, and organised cultural weeks, focuses, projects and shows.

Significant sacrifices have had to be made for this to happen and it is no small achievement for many students have not returned home at all this academic year. There are even some of you second-year students who have not returned home since you arrived in August 2019. To keep the community safe, you have all stayed within the village of Duino and have sacrificed a lot to allow your education to continue. So, to have achieved what you have achieved in the face of this adversity is quite remarkable.

This has been a year in which, as students, you have not been able to explore anything beyond Duino – the cultural richness and delights that Italy offers within our region and beyond have not been visited or explored. The socialising that usually takes place with Duinesi in the cafés or on the streets of the village has not taken place. The integration with local people through social services and projects has been limited to an online experience. Family and friends have not been able to visit you to get a greater understanding of your Adriatic experience. Inevitably, all of this has had a negative impact on morale, wellbeing and mental health.

However, these sacrifices have allowed a UWC education to continue and for the College to continue to operate. Where many students around the world have been sitting in front of computers as their mode of learning, you have been in classrooms learning with your peers and receiving in-person teaching. Experiential learning has occurred outside the classroom through the everyday conversations among our diverse student population, through the CAS programme, and through focuses and cultural events. You have been able to enjoy the views of the Gulf of Trieste from the Rilke path, spend time swimming in the sea (even in winter) and hike in the Carso. Great friendships have been deepened, and the time spent in residences and getting through the pandemic together will have forged bonds that will last a life time. Furthermore, a yet unknown strength and resilience has been shaped in every student and while you may not feel or recognise now, when hard times come in the future (which they will) the immense challenges of this period will have prepared you well for further adversity.

It my hope, therefore, that we all try to look back on this year and reflect on the positive elements, as hard as that may be. It is easy for us to dwell on the negative aspects in our lives but by focusing on the positives we can frame the 2019-21 experience in a different light. By doing this we can acknowledge that, yes, it has been an incredibly tough period, but we can be stronger people for it, we can be grateful for having been part of a community in which we could interact in person every day and from that our friendships run deeper than they did before. When many students and others who work in education were confined to learning at home, we were together as a community and that allowed our educational experience to be that much richer than it has been in many other places this academic year. I am therefore drawn to the words of Epictetus who said, "It is a wise person who does not grieve for the things which they have not, but rejoices for those which they have".

So what next? Well, in these times, it is difficult to know what the coming months will bring let alone the coming years but as leavers of this College there are certain responsibilities I hope you will hold close to you, wherever you are and whatever you face. You can continue to fly the UWC flag, to

keep our values close to your hearts, to share with others the benefits of those values and to try to make the world a better place. Whatever happens in your futures you understand the concept of personal responsibility, you celebrate diversity, and you have compassion for others. When you combine this with the resilience developed in each and every one of you by getting through the challenges of the past 14 months, I know that you are well equipped to flourish in your lives and to make a positive difference on whichever paths life takes you.

I therefore wish you all the very best wherever you go and in whatever you do.

Thank you.