

Once Upon a Time in UMUC

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Once upon a time (about 1978, I think), I filled out an application for UMUC and then forgot about it and did a few other things. That is, until 2001 when I was well situated as Chief of Psychology at the Houston VAMC and received a phone call one Friday afternoon, "How would you like to teach for the UMUC in Europe?" I thought for about 2 minutes, maybe less, and enthusiastically said, "Yes." Then I went to the personnel department and filled out my retirement papers. I tend to be impulsive at times, but I never regretted it; this was the best decision I have ever made.

My first assignment was in Darmstadt, Germany, a great beginning and followed by living in five other countries and teaching at eleven different locations. But I must admit that initially, I had a few bad feelings and reservations surrounding our history with Germany. Then 9-11 occurred. Within days, local people laid flower wreaths at the base's gates and expressed solidarity with us both publicly and in the newspapers. Several Germans wore T-shirts emblazoned with "*Ich bin ein Amerikaner.*"

Since then, I have had many close and beautiful relationships with people wherever I lived abroad, but in many ways, this initial encounter was one of the most powerful. It helped me resolve any lingering prejudices and be open to appreciate how others could forgo theirs and "move on." In all my years of living and traveling in Europe, I have not once experienced any hostility towards me as an American. In fact, the opposite has been my most common experience. Many people went out of their way to be friendly, to the point of inviting me into their homes. One man I especially remember was carrying two heavy bags of groceries but insisted on giving me a 45-minute tour of "His" town. He would not allow me to assist him, and when I offered, he assured me that they were not heavy. I often feel like while with UMUC, in addition to my salary, I received an outstanding, and free, graduate education in International Relations. My personal classrooms were in the 22 different counties and over 250 towns and cities I visited long enough to stay in or take photos during my years with UMUC.

I noticed that several others who have shared their experiences, like Sharon and Tom Hudgins, also mentioned the quality of the students we taught. Before moving to Europe, I had taught Graduate, Undergraduate, and Medical School students but hands down, and the politest and most fun students I have encountered were those I met through UMUC. Whenever I congratulated a student on a good grade or paper, one of the most common responses I received was, "Well, why wouldn't I do my best? This is my one chance to obtain an education and move ahead in life." Some, of course, had joined the military only for the opportunity for a college education. Others saw it as a key

to their military advancement, but they were all serious students. Many had to struggle to make up for a poor undergraduate background, but they were especially proud when they succeeded. I regret that I could not follow the subsequent careers of many of my students, but a few do still write, which makes it all the more worthwhile.

I have often been asked which of the places in which I lived I would like to return to, and I have thought of this myself at times. Simple answer "I do not know," nor would I want to be forced into such a decision. Each had its unique qualities, and I could live happily forever in any of them. I know that I quickly became very comfortable with each new location, just about when I received a notice to move once again. And I then loved each new home. Why I had to leave my position with UMUC and why I cannot return has more to do with a mild but annoying medical problem than simple desire.

Of course, I never returned a paycheck, but I often felt that I was on a paid vacation. Besides, I also got to periodically show off my knowledge to a bunch of students who always seemed interested. And in-between, I was able to roam around in a style best referred to in the Spanish Language as: "*Sin rumbo fijo*." I think that if I ever design a heraldic emblem, that will be its motto. That I will stop now and not go "on and on" now may surprise some of my past students, but I think that it is as good a place as any. I have enjoyed my recollections, and I hope that since you have read to this place that you also have. Hello to the many valued colleagues I met along the way. I wish you well, and I look forward to reading your stories.

Alexander