



Christiane Neuville:
The Accomplishment of a Goal

Christiane Neuville was a member of the founding faculty, taking on multiple roles as registrar, college counselor and instructor in French. She stayed through the year 2000, seeing UHS into the new millennium. She earned a place in the hearts of more than 2000 UHS students and their families as well as her colleagues. The class of 2000, in their yearbook dedication, said that Madame Neuville smothered them with support and rooted for their happiness, earning their respect in every meaning of the word. True to form, Christiane did not hesitate jumping on a plane and crossing the country to be with her school at this milestone. Here are her remarks made at a dinner celebration of the promise of UHS on February 9.

As we gather today to celebrate the anniversary of the founding of this young but venerable institution, those who were present at the creation remember well, I am certain, the little office a top a cheese shop on Sacramento street -now defunct- where Dennis Collins, our founding head, held fort. I remember vividly my interview: it was Columbus Day 1974; I even recall the dress I wore! I was told this was going to be a school of the city, for the whole city, not just for Pacific Heights. It was to be a model of equity and excellence. It was to be sure a noble goal and never did I have a single doubt that we would accomplish that goal.

In the first chapter of its existence the school was almost utopian in that it was blessed with real needs and with an abundance of talent to accomplish the task. The faculty - all sixteen of us - was a motley crew; from a lawyer who taught history to two of us who came from a school well over one hundred years old. These early days were for me among the most exciting of my professional life. In a sense we felt that we were the school; we believed in the vision of our founders and that it was an honor and a privilege to be part of the enterprise. That is not to say that we did not have disagreements. We had lengthy debates about the grading system; how long should progress reports be, would you believe when I tell you that some of us, few to be sure, wanted them to be a page long? Should we have bells to announce passing tune? Dennis even suggested the first few bars of a famous Beethoven symphony. We rebelled when we were told to wear academic gowns at graduation and look at what happened to that rebellion! We argued, we deliberated but we listened to each other, and our enthusiasm galvanized us into action. After all we were pioneers and we each had a vision of what this school should be.

Starting with a student body of one hundred fifty, we were in the eye of the hurricane. Would "the new school" as it was known, succeed? Built on the principle that a strong challenging liberal education would be at the core of the curriculum, it was much more than that. From the onset it was clear that values, such as respect for others, would be a fundamental part of a UHS education, a point that has become increasingly strong over the years, not an easy task given the lack of role models on the national level. By

allowing our students to make their mark in addition to academic ways- music, theater, the arts- colleges began to realize that the students coming from this little school that seemed to have come out of no where, were a notch above many of the graduates of prep schools across the country. We were way ahead of the times by requiring involvement in the community outside Jackson Street. And nowadays when I read articles and books about college admissions, testing and the likes, I am glad I did not know the formidable obstacles we were facing on that front - obstacles that are becoming increasingly difficult to overcome. While as an institution we do not believe in the publication of individual's college choices, we knew in these early days that our college results were scrutinized as a measure of our achievement. That we have become as successful on that front is a tribute to the school leadership and to the extraordinary dedication of the faculty to their students.

As time went on and the student body grew in size along with the faculty, community service became an intrinsic part of the curriculum; new courses came to life, old ones were modified, Summerbridge was born. Since its early days this school has never stood still. Always trying to be the best, never content to rest on its own success, always looking at itself, reevaluating, reassessing, UHS is its own most severe and tough critic. We did work very hard in these early days but I would not want you to think that we did not have a good time. I was reminded tonight when I saw my former colleague and friend Paul Chapman, of the college trips we used to take. We rented two station wagons and took twelve seniors to visit colleges on the east coast. One day as we were looking for Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut, we looked and looked and finally found a large red brick building. We knew we had arrived. As we parked our cars, a woman came out of the building and asked what we wanted. "We are looking for the Office of Admissions," we said. She assured us we were in the right place. "For whom," she added. We answered: "For all our students." She looked horrified and added: "For all of them?" We knew then that something was amiss and made certain that indeed we were at Trinity College. "Oh no," she replied, "this is the Connecticut Asylum for the Insane."

After the first ten years there were serious bumps in the road on the administrative front, a fact which under the strong leadership of the board of trustees and Diana Tolpegin made this place even more vibrant and stronger. It was no longer the nirvana we had experienced at the beginning; the baby had now become a rambunctious teenager. Encouraged to question and empowered to challenge, the students began to demand answers to questions they deemed important; student government became stronger and asked that UHS take a good look at itself when it came to diversity. Students stood up for causes dear to them, for friends who may have been singled out for their race or their sexual orientation. At one point a group of students published an underground paper exposing, for right or wrong, what they perceived as unfairness. To this day I believe that this freedom of expression was the result of the work of a faculty who never stood for the *status quo* and who in the process became the excellent role models the students so sorely needed.

As the student body grew so did the building: the auditorium no longer doubled up for the gym as it did in 1976; the lower campus came to life. The cafeteria and science labs

followed, a spectacular library was built and now rebuilt to accommodate the increasing needs of the student body and to move in the technological age. The auditorium became a spectacular theater.

Some time ago as I was cleaning out my UHS files, I came across a comment from the man to whom I am eternally grateful for hiring me. This is what Dennis Collins wrote: "A school is a living thing . The breath it takes each day are palpable, its movements and stretching dictate the direction in which it heads. Its care and feeding depend upon those who love it. Like the muscle not exercised, the unattended school atrophies. A school which fails to look ahead stands little chance of controlling its future."

There is no better exercise after the 25 years I have spent in this institution than to step back and observe. It is clear after seeing teachers come and go, heads come and go, that the school has not changed fundamentally speaking, rather it has grown up, it has evolved. It has been nurtured, cared for and very much loved; in the process it made believers out of the doubters. Indeed a school like an education is an on-going process rather than a finished product. It is only as good as its faculty and its leaders are. UHS has succeeded in a spectacular way because of the selflessness of the adults involved in its day-to-day life, from the teaching staff, its librarian and its head of school to the administrative and maintenance staff. Today, after thirty years of existence it is clear that history is judging us not so much on our personal accomplishments but rather on how we are doing the job.

HAPPY BIRTHDAY UHS, MAY YOU LIVE FAR LONGER THAN ANY OF US IN THIS ROOM!!!