How can we make the world a better place? How can we foster understanding and unity between people from different nations and cultures? How can we help build a sustainable future for our planet? These are the big questions that we have all pondered at one time or another and there are surely as many different answers as there are people in the world. For American philanthropist Shelby Davis, however, there is one simple answer to all these questions: Education.

Shelby and his wife Gale recently visited United World College Thailand's (UWCT) campus in Phuket to extend their US$1 million Davis Impact Matching Fund to the school. Over the last two decades Shelby’s generous and steadfast support has propelled the greater umbrella organisation United World Colleges (UWC) further on its mission to make education a force to unite people, nations and cultures for a peaceful and sustainable future.

Founded in 1909 at the height of the Cold War, UWC was the vision of German educationalist Kurt Hahn, who in 1933 was exiled to the UK after speaking out against the Nazis. Having witnessed the catastrophic results of World War II, Hahn sought to unite bright young students, aged between 16 and 19 and from many different nations, to become champions of peace through an education based on shared learning, collaboration and understanding. Hahn believed deeply in the power of education to change the world and that if young people from diverse backgrounds could be educated together, devastating future conflicts could be avoided.

In the late 1990s, at the invitation of his friend Phil Geier (then President of UWC-USA) Shelby Davis visited the UWC-USA’s New Mexico campus. He was deeply impressed by the students he met there and by Hahn’s educational vision. As a result of that first fateful visit, Shelby has gone on to donate countless millions in scholarship funding to the 17 UWC schools across the globe and millions more with university scholarships for thousands of UWC graduates going to select American post-secondary institutions.

“I went to UWC in New Mexico and I was blown away by the talent of the kids. They came from 80 different countries and were all boarding together, there was every race, religion and culture you can imagine,” said Shelby.

“I could see right away that this was a microcosm of the world. They have kids from all over the world and they learn to live together, to respect differences and still get along. It’s a lesson the world needs to learn… because the alternative is violence,” he added.

Shelby himself is living proof of the value of education, with a degree from Princeton University in hand, he was able to land a job at The Bank of New York. Once there, he rapidly rose through the ranks to become Head of the Research Department and the bank’s youngest vice president since US Founding Father Alexander Hamilton. In 1969, Davis struck out on his own and founded the investment management firm Davis Selected Advisers. Once again his education stood him in good stead, and through savvy investment in the burgeoning mutual fund industry, he built his considerable fortune over the next three decades.

Shelby says that the UWC mission resonates strongly with him due to his own background and upbringing. His father was a respected business man and diplomat who advised two US Presidents and his mother was a philanthropist and scholar of world affairs who championed women’s rights. I grew up with it, my parents were both internationalists, they both got PhDs and Masters degrees at Columbia and the University of Geneva – which is the home of the League of Nations – they knew people from all over the world and they made sure I visited countries with them.”

He credits his incredibly generous philanthropy to the lessons taught to him by his parents, who imparted to him their philosophy of “learn, earn, return.”

“We have a saying in my family, that my father and mother taught me… in the first 30 years you focus on learning; in the next 30 years you focus on earning; and in the last 30 years… if you’re lucky… you focus on returning,” he says.

This wise advice was foremost in Shelby’s mind when he began providing scholarships for academically high-achieving students who lacked the financial means to attend a UWC school. However, when the first batch of his UWC scholarship students graduated, he realised that many of them, despite being academically selected for enrollment at a prestigious university, would be unable to pay the high fees.

“To me it was a waste of talent, it was stranding kids that were getting into good universities because they didn’t have the money. Now, I don’t have the ability to cure Alzheimer’s, or invent something new, but I knew that education creates possibilities. If you have an education, you have more possibilities in life, so I’m all for funding kids to have more possibilities,” he said.

Determined to fix the problem Shelby, together with Phil Geier, created the Davis-UWC Scholars Program – with the aim of “advancing international and cross-cultural understanding on US college campuses and ultimately throughout the world”. Since its inception in 2000, the program has provided scholarships to 7,686 scholars for students from over 150 countries and is the largest international scholarship program for undergraduates in the world. The need-based scholarships are available to every UWC graduate who gains acceptance and matriculates at one of the 100 US universities involved in the program.

By his own estimate, Shelby provides “between 30 to 40 million dollars” per year to fund the Davis-UWC Scholars Program. As increasing numbers of UWC students graduate and take up a Davis Scholarship, the yearly funding costs rises inexorably – but if Davis is daunted by the magnitude of his ongoing commitment, he hid it well.

“I’ve been lucky in the mutual fund business. The money rolled in and now the money is rolling out under the philosophy of ‘earn, learn, return’. I’m glad I found something really big to focus on – it’s consuming to tell you the truth. I’ve visited every UWC school at least once and I tell the kids it keeps me young at heart. It makes you much more optimistic, more vibrant and more energetic I think,” he shared.

“We’re in a global world and a global workplace, so kids from various parts of the world need to learn to live and work together, and maybe, as we integrate the world, we can have a better chance of having global peace,” he said.

While Davis has high hopes for every UWC student who takes up a scholarship, it is also clear that he believes a good education is not merely a means to an end, but an end in itself.

“The UWC teachers often tell me ‘this kid is going to be the next president, or a great scientist’. But if they are just good in their community and make a difference in their community, at their job, with their families, I don’t really care… as long as they have an open mind, an open heart, and open eyes to the world. That’s what we need – more of those citizens.”

Learn more at: www.uwcsthailand.ac.th or www.davisuwcscholars.org