CONNECTICUT COLLEGE

National Peace Corps Association

Third Goal Expo: Building Global Communities

Keynote by Leo I. Higdon (Malawi 1968-1970), Connecticut College President

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Leo I. Higdon, Jr., has been the president of Connecticut College since July 1, 2006. Under his leadership, Connecticut College has been recognized as a top producer of Fulbright awards and a top producer of Peace Corps volunteers. The college won the Sen. Paul A. Simon Award for Campus Internationalization in 2009 and has been named to the President's Honor Roll for Community Service, with Distinction. He and his wife Ann served as Peace Corps volunteers in Malawi from 1968 to 1970. Higdon's keynote address to the Peace Corps Third Goal Expo: Building Global Communities is below.

Good afternoon. Forty five years ago, my wife Ann and I made a decision that would change the course of our lives. It was a decision that ultimately impacted how we raised our children, our service to the communities we've called home, career decisions and even how we relate to others. We joined the Peace Corps. Today, I am pleased to welcome you here to this important gathering of Peace Corps volunteers, educators, supporters and prospective PCVs.

You will recognize my story because in so many ways, my story is also yours. Those of you who have served will have similar stories. And if you haven't had the opportunity to serve, but you're here to learn more, I thank you. Thank you for recognizing the Peace Corps' mission and its potential role in your life.

My wife Ann and I grew up in the Kennedy era. We were nothing less than inspired by President Kennedy's leadership, his belief in the power of youth, and his commitment to harness that power and put it to good work in the world. His legacy reminded us that the Peace Corps was the best of what young Americans could do overseas. We were two young college students who talked a lot about what to do after school. We both felt we had been very blessed growing up. It was the 1960s, a time of turmoil in the country and in the world, yet Ann and I had gone to good schools, worked during college. Amid the turmoil of that era, we were two young people who really had our acts together – and service to others was something we felt deeply about. We believed strongly that we had an obligation – a responsibility – to give back, to make a meaningful impact in the world. We had dreams, we had aspirations and the Peace Corps gave us goals. World peace and fellowship? The Peace Corps' founding goals sounded pretty darn good to us!

We got married shortly after graduation, applied for a joint assignment, and, after the interviews, health screenings and vaccinations – and after months of training in Louisiana and three airplane flights – we arrived in Malawi, a small land-locked country in sub-Saharan Africa. Our first couple of months was spent in Blantyre, the largest city in Malawi, for our in-country training. Then we were off to our home in Chiradzulu.

Malawi in 1968 was everything we had imagined, and nothing like we had imagined. I could try to articulate the stark beauty of the landscape and its people, but it would take far longer than we have today for me to describe the trees, the mountains and beautiful Lake Malawi.

It was beautiful, yes. It also had its challenges. That's why we were there. The country had been through some political upheaval in the years before it gained independence. Its name was new, its government was new and it had a new president. Plus it had all the issues you could expect of a poor, landlocked, heavily populated, mineral-poor country. To top that off, we weren't the first Peace Corps volunteers to serve in our village. Our predecessors had run into problems and, unfortunately, been deported. There were some hard feelings, some misunderstandings and some resentments. That's the environment that greeted me and my wife in 1968.

But we were prepared to work hard at this relationship. We had made promises to the Peace Corps and to each other. And, as we came to know the people of our village, we knew we were there for the long haul.

Ann and I were teachers, but as those of you who have served learned from your own experiences, we were so much more. As we continued to give all we could of ourselves to these people whom we loved and respected, we began to understand what they were giving to us.

Our first lesson came in a classroom of young Malawians. There, amid centuries-old traditions, knowing that the slightest cultural misstep could result in our being kicked out of town – remember, it had happened to others. Well, that had a way of focusing our attention. This was no neatly wrapped package of multiculturalism, no tidy Hollywood story of instant understanding. It was sink-or-swim, real work from the very first day. We were willing to learn, and, out of necessity, we learned how to listen. We learned not just names and statistics, but the people's cultural beliefs and traditions. We learned to be open-minded and freed our minds of any and all preconceived notions. We knew from the first day that we could not be effective until we saw the world through the eyes of the people we were there to serve.

And we did, indeed, see the world through their eyes. This is, perhaps, the most important lesson Ann and I took from our experience in the Peace Corps. It served us incredibly well during our two years in Malawi, and it's a value we have incorporated into every aspect of our lives since. One of the things I did in Malawi was try to capture some of the district's history, a history that could only be told through the stories of its people. I traveled through the local countryside, speaking to residents, trying to get them to reconstruct their memories. What a curiosity I must have presented! I quickly learned that I had to spend quite a bit of time with

people, establishing my credibility – talking about many, many things and building a relationship – before I could communicate at a level significant enough to fulfill my objectives.

There were other challenges as well. The Malawian language often did not have corresponding vocabulary to describe some of the things we were trying to teach in school. This was especially true for Ann, who was teaching science. Language requires improvisation, deft translation of terms to understand the nuances of another person's language and culture. These lessons have stayed with me and informed the business person, educator and college leader I eventually became, as well as my personal roles as husband, father, grandfather, mentor and more. These lessons – about the importance of culture, the global nature of our world, the importance of communication – were lessons that opened our minds and broadened our attitudes. They helped us recognize the struggles and challenges people have. We became more appreciative about all we have, more empathetic. In fact, I can confidently say that my embrace of diversity, and all I have strived to do throughout my career to support the advance of diversity, had its roots in the Peace Corps.

Our lives had many such roots. Interestingly enough, Ann's and my roles as parents began in Malawi when our son Larry was born during our second year there. I probably don't need to remind you that we had no electricity, no running water and we were living in a place that had a high infant mortality rate. Both of us were full-time Peace Corps volunteers, so we had full workloads and really had to juggle our responsibilities to take care of our son. Ann would teach while I would watch Larry, and then we'd switch. We adapted and Baby Larry became part of our Peace Corps team. Where we went, he went. What we did, he did. It added a level of complication to our work, and really that in itself was an important lesson. But we were very popular as we traveled with our son!

Our experience shaped us. I want to share something with you today that I have told a number of people who've asked about our Peace Corps experience: I truly believe that my parents and family shaped my personality and values – and my education gave me my skills – but it was the Peace Corps that truly gave me my soul.

Forty five years later, I am now in a position to understand more clearly just what I got out of my time as a Peace Corps volunteer – and how I have used those lessons I learned in Malawi to shape my career. Today, I still use what I learned in the Peace Corps in my role as the president of Connecticut College. Connecticut College is a small, residential, very selective, liberal arts college in New London, Connecticut. It is an amazing place, a place where students truly are transformed by the education they receive and the experiences they have.

I see many similarities between the college students I know today and the young Peace Corps volunteers Ann and I were way back then. Today's students are graduating into a global economy. Their education not only needs to prepare them for the concrete demands of leadership, communication and innovation, they also need to know the fundamental values for success: how to learn, how to listen and how to adapt. These are things I learned in the Peace Corps and today, they are values we infuse into student learning.

The Peace Corps' "Third Goal," the concept of bringing the world back home, it's a concept I believe deeply in because I've lived it. Let me give you some examples: When I arrived at Connecticut College in 2006, I embarked on a series of meetings with students, faculty, staff, alumni, parents, local community leaders – everyone who could help me understand the culture of the college and what its aspirations were. From those meetings, I developed a set of strategic priorities that include a focus on internationalizing the college community.

Today, the ability to bring an international perspective to issues and problems is an educational necessity, not an option. The most urgent issues of our time – food, energy, world health, the environment, economic well-being – are global in scope. Thanks to strong international programs that include study abroad and conducting research or internships abroad, many Connecticut College students – well over half – were already graduating with an overseas experience. What we set out to do was inculcate an international perspective into ALL of our students.

How do we do that? Well, it starts with language. All students are required to study a foreign language, and many become fluent. We also actively recruit students from across the globe. Currently, nearly 100 international students are represented on the New London campus. These students facilitate cross cultural, political and social dialogue among the members of the Connecticut College and the local community.

One student – a young woman who had been homeschooled in a little town near our campus – told me that in her first year, one of her roommates was from India and the other from Pakistan. She said they taught her things she would never have learned in a classroom, such as the lyrics to an Indian pop song, how to wear a sari, and how American TV shows and music have permeated all cultures. That's a form of internationalization.

A year or so ago, when one of our students won a Goldwater Scholarship, he was studying in Madagascar so I emailed him with the news. This kind of connection would have been unheard of in my Peace Corps days! He sent back his thanks and told me that before college, he had never traveled outside of the United States. He said he was emailing me from a cyber café in Madagascar, that he had just spent three months volunteering in the Cameroons, had gone to Italy for an academic conference and then to Brazil for a visit. After his semester in Madagascar, he was headed to Uganda for a summer research project. It almost makes my head spin, but that's internationalization!

So, we send our students abroad to study and to do research, we offer College-funded internships abroad so students can get experience working in another country, and we enroll a significant number of international students, as I mentioned. We also support faculty to teach and do research abroad and to bring back that experience into our classrooms. We have hired a significant number of international faculty who add their own unique perspectives as well. Our professors are constantly revising their courses and programs to reflect this international perspective. Some people think you can internationalize an education by recruiting more international students – and that certainly helps – but the faculty make a tremendous difference.

To bring it all together, we offer a great many programs that expose the community to other cultures. For example: we not only require foreign language study, we encourage students to practice their language within our community. We have, for example, peer language fellows who work with students to use the language, and then use the language to understand the culture. And we have many opportunities to practice language in ways that incorporate the culture. Students and faculty might get together to prepare a meal of traditional Russian food, for instance. Then they'll eat together and the dinner conversation is in Russian. After dinner, they might Skype with a student in St. Petersburg, or watch a Russian documentary online. It's remarkable how simple, yet thoughtful, events like this can transform students and make accessible the world beyond our borders. Some of it is fun, sure. But it's also substantive. We take globalization seriously and we try to live it every day.

Through this education, we provide students with structured opportunities to extend, share and consolidate their global knowledge. I can say with absolute conviction that Connecticut College is today a college of globally aware, globally directed students and faculty. Engagement with the world, a sense of purpose – these values define Connecticut College, they define me, and, through the good work of the Peace Corps and all of its volunteers, they will continue to define humanity.

Thank you.