

CHRISTOPHER SZECSEY'S INCREDIBLE JOURNEY

Ham and Babs Warren based the founding of Verde Valley School on an idea. “If we bring together talented young people from around the world and ask them to build and to study, to work and to learn, we can change the world for the better.” Member of the VVS Class of 1967 and inaugural Warren Award recipient, Christopher Szecsey was just the sort of young person they were looking for.

Currently working in international development as a consultant, trainer, and facilitator, with over 35 years of worldwide development experience, Christopher works with international nonprofits, local nongovernmental groups (NGOs), government agencies, and UN agencies in diverse cultures and countries around the world. Although his assignments vary depending on the needs of the client, Christopher says he mostly strengthens partnerships between organizations and builds the capacity of organizations to more effectively carry out positive social change, through community mobilization and advocacy/policy influence. A common thread throughout his work is enhancing individual, team and organizational performance and program effectiveness with multiple stakeholders.

“Over the years, clients have commented that I have an amazing ability to quickly establish rapport with people of

different cultures, to quickly begin to communicate and work with people who differ in gender, age, culture, and race,” comments Christopher, who attributes this skill and his interest in other cultures to the time that he spent at Verde Valley School.

Christopher’s first experience with diversity began at home. His parents were immigrants from Europe. His mother was English, his father Austro-Hungarian – and they settled in the San Fernando Valley, in the Los Angeles area. While he has kept his interest in surfing, little else remains of his Southern California years where, he recalls, sub-cultures were important and teens had little sense of individuality. As it still is today, being part of a group was especially important to most adolescents at that time. Christopher found something different in Sedona.

After researching and considering the usual private boarding schools, his parents discovered VVS. After an initial visit to the school, Christopher was excited about VVS, and its mission. Fortunately, both his parents agreed VVS would be the best choice. Christopher enrolled his sophomore year and graduated in 1967. He still believes his decision to attend was one of the best decisions of his life because of the many advantages the school offered from meaningful intercultural education to

providing a student culture of acceptance and individuality.

THE VVS YEARS

While his interest in other cultures and his passion to help globally may have been sparked at VVS, Christopher reflects that, at the time, he wasn’t fully aware that his time at the school marked the beginning of what would be a fairly consistent and logical career path that continues today. The anthropology and Field Trip programs at VVS were fundamental to igniting his curiosity about and appreciation for other cultures.

Joe Brown and Denny Salzman were especially instrumental to Christopher’s passion for learning about other cultures. The speaker program in the chapel was influential as well. During these chapel talks, VVS students listened to speakers like Edward Hall (author of *Silent Language* and *The Hidden Dimension*) who not only talked to students about what they did, but challenged their assumptions about other cultures and religions.

“The speakers often challenged us to think in ways that hadn’t occurred to us until then,” says Christopher.

Other VVS teachers at the time, such as David Miller and Cliff Perkins also had an important influence on his personal and academic development. He especially remembers the personal interest that such teachers took in indi-

vidual students, like himself, and their efforts to link classroom study to living in the world.

While VVS's whole emphasis on intercultural understanding, including its Field Trip program, as well as its service to others was "hugely influential in his development", so was the school's location. Set amongst the beautiful red rocks, Christopher says the area's beauty encouraged an understanding and love of nature (he recalls trips to the creek and sleeping outdoors) that led to a feeling of connection with and appreciation of nature, as well as an understanding of the meaning of environmental stewardship. He adds that the field trips combined both an understanding of other cultures and a respect for the environment.

In particular, teaching at a Head Start program in the Chinle area and a home-stay in a hogan with a Navajo family left a lasting impression on Christopher. During his home-stay, Christopher remembers being responsible for herding 125 sheep with the help of the family's sheep dog, who obviously knew more about sheep herding than a kid from the San Fernando Valley. The total immersion into another culture – living, eating, sleeping, and working with Native American and Mexican families – had a life-long influence on him.

THE COLLEGE YEARS

Christopher's Field Trips to Mexico and to the Navajo and Hopi nations were such powerful experiences that they guided his decision to major in anthropology in college and seek more of such intercultural and field-based education. He attended Callison College (now named School of International Studies) of the University of the Pacific in California, which he says was quite similar to VVS in its emphasis on global

citizenship and cross-cultural experiences.

In fact, three other VVS alumni attended Callison College as well: Peter Votichenko of the same class of '67 as well as Bob Banner and Jonathan Meredith both of the class of '69.

During Christopher's first year of college, his anthropology professor was so impressed with his knowledge of Native American cultures, he asked Christopher to lead a seminar on Native Americans for his fellow freshmen. Christopher's seminar included leading other students to the Hopi and Navajo nations in Arizona. For many in his seminar, this was their first trip outside of their home state and own culture.

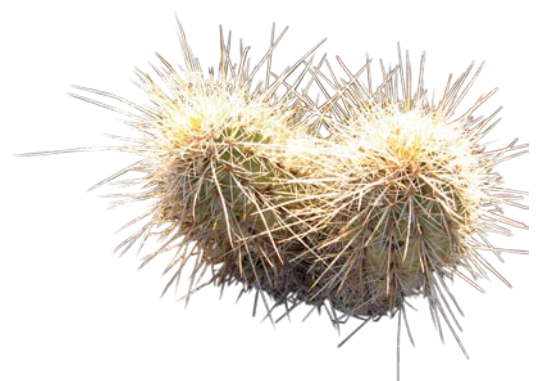
Like VVS, Callison College emphasized global citizenship and cross-cultural learning. The school's founders believed that a well-rounded liberal arts education should include not only Western thought but also an understanding of non-Western culture, with the requirement of spending one academic year abroad. At the time, Christopher and his class spent their sophomore year living in India. In addition to the required classes, each student selected an individual study topic in India. Christopher focused on Gandhi's non-violent philosophy of life and action, and included in his studies was a one-month stay at the Gandhi Ashram.

In addition to spending his sophomore year in India, he attended the college's program in Yucatan, Mexico, for half of his junior year. Again, such field trips and study were very much like VVS, and allowed for a deeper learning not only of academics but also of life skills.

During their senior year at Callison College students completed a thesis project that integrated Western and Eastern understanding of culture, philosophy, or religion. For his senior year project, Christopher chose to work with



Pictured above is a copy of the Press Democrat published in 2005 which featured Christopher Szecsey '67 work with Aceh tsunami orphans. For two years, Christopher raised money in the US to provide school fees, materials and supplies for these orphans to ensure that they stayed in school and continued their education. Christopher used to live in Aceh, Indonesia, and he has been active with several different assignments geared toward post-tsunami recovery work for the last few years. He has worked with Save the Children/US, the American Red Cross, World Wildlife Fund, and U.N. FAO.





the United Farm Workers of America movement, under Cesar Chavez, where he worked with Filipino and Hispanic workers and supported strikes and boycotts. He even interviewed Chavez for his thesis, which focused on the application of Gandhi's philosophy in the Western context.

GRADUATION

When he graduated from college, he was left with a dilemma – what would he do with his love of, and a degree in, anthropology? He wasn't interested in teaching or studying groups of people; he wanted to work with people in other cultures. So he joined the Peace Corps and served in Ecuador. There it soon became evident to him that while other Peace Corps volunteers may have possessed high technical skills they had very little experience with, or understanding of, other cultures, especially in living and working in them. This made their experience difficult, uncomfortable, and frustrating. Christopher, however, found his VVS and college educations and cultural experiences enabled him to complete a fulfilling and productive three-year stint.

His Peace Corps posting was in the Andes at 8,000 feet, where he lived and

worked in rural areas with indigenous communities. He implemented agricultural and health/nutrition projects as well as general community development efforts.

In 1974 his stint in the Peace Corps came to an end, so he traveled throughout South America to Tierra del Fuego and back to Ecuador. Upon his return to Ecuador, he took a job with the country's first natural food store and restaurant in Quito. Near the end of '74, he traveled through Central America on his return to the states.


"I remember being more in a state of culture shock in returning to the USA and trying to fit in, than any thing I had ever experienced in living in other cultures. It was a challenging and frustrating period during my first year back in my so called own culture."

He finally found a job as a program coordinator for the Center for Developmental Teaching, a program that gave university credit for college students willing to spend one semester in Oaxaca, Mexico, working on individual projects. Christopher set up house in another culture, glad to be living and working in Latin American once again.

Eventually, Christopher returned once again to the states, and spent a few

years at a non-profit research, demonstration, and education center, called the Farallones Institute, working in appropriate community technology where he became the director of International Programs. His work there included managing training programs for Peace Corps volunteers going overseas, and leading workshops in other countries.

Eventually, Christopher landed an assignment in 1982 with a U.N.D.P. development project in Nepal to establish a national appropriate technology program with the government. After two years in Nepal, he joined Save the Children/US to serve as a country director for the next nine years. He and his wife, Mary, managed community-based integrated development and NGO partnering/capacity-building programs, first in the Pacific Islands for three years, and then six years in two different locations in Indonesia (Aceh and Eastern Indonesia). During this period, Christopher and Mary had two sons. After 12 years of overseas living and working, Christopher and Mary finally returned to the US in 1994. Still not sure what to do in the US, he decided to continue with his love of international work and became an independent consultant.



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THE PRESENT

Today, as a consultant, Christopher generally travels the world extensively (and yes, feels terrible about his carbon footprint!). His peers speak of his ability to break through a lot of barriers quickly. “It’s more than understanding the language or culture, but it’s the way I interact in other cultures with speaking, and my understanding of the importance of non-verbal communication.”

He says he finds fulfillment in most of his varied assignments which range from work in such different locations as Afghanistan, Russia, Kenya, etc. he shared three that especially stand out for him:

- He has been working for the last three years on a National Women’s Reproductive Health program that brings together an international non-profit and the Government of Vietnam from the national to local levels. His particular work had been in assessing and strengthening the inter-organizational partnership to support successful project implementation. He is now working with colleagues in writing a case study for an academic publication.

- His various assignments in Aceh, Indonesia, with the post-tsunami recovery work of the last few years. He has worked there with Save the Children/US, the American Red Cross, World Wildlife Fund and U.N. FAO.

- His three years of work in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan, building civil society in emerging democracies where historically there were no non-profit organizations.

At present, he is supporting a three-year project in Kenya working with six international organizations and 25 local NGOs on two large integrated health projects, mostly focused on HIV/AIDS from prevention to coping.

He is also the chair of the board of directors of an international nonprofit, called Outer Voices. This organization documents and records the lives of women activists in developing countries involved in social change.

He also leads overseas trips for a local public high school every two years. This activity is a homage to the influence VVS’s field trips had on his own life as a teen. This summer he will lead a trip of

teachers, parents, and students to Nepal and Thailand.

Along this incredible life journey Christopher has remembered his high school with fond memories. He believes that being exposed, early in life, to the experiences he gained at VVS (like field trips and the diversity student body) as well as VVS’s brand of education and its special mission (with an emphasis on world citizenship) provided critically important formative experiences that helped him on choose his life’s path.

“I attribute a lot of my personal and professional success in the world to VVS’s teachers and the experiences I had there, as well as all the years I’ve spent living and working overseas,” he says.

“A lot of who I am today was nurtured in subsequent experiences, but the seeds were definitely sown at VVS, for which I feel sincere appreciation.”

Christopher and Mary Szcsey have been married for 25 years, and have two sons, Aron, a senior at UC Berkeley, and Nikolas, a high school senior. They live in Occidental, Sonoma County in Northern California on a beautiful piece of rural land. Christopher’s e-address is: mszcsey@sonic.net.