Every year, elite international students arrive at UF. When COVID-19 struck, 53 of the Davis United World College Scholars stayed behind. Here are some of their stories.

Raised in a large, extended family, UF junior Yehya Haj, 22, usually talks to his mother once a day. Since the COVID-19 pandemic began, that ritual hasn’t changed — but their topics of conversation have.

“Normally, the first thing she asks me is, ‘Did you eat? Do you have enough food at your house?’” said Haj. “Now, the new question is, ‘Did you go outside today? She really doesn’t want me to risk getting the virus.’”

Like other Gator parents, Haj’s mother has been deeply concerned about her child’s well-being during the pandemic. The difference is, she and Haj’s father live more than 3,000 miles away in central Lebanon — and their son is not returning home any time soon, not while travel restrictions are still in flux and a vaccine for the virus has yet to complete clinical trials.

Fortunately, Haj did not ride out the first stage of the pandemic alone at UF. He is part of a close-knit tribe of exceptional international students — the Davis United World College (UWC) Scholars at UF — whose undergraduate studies and living expenses are covered by visionary American philanthropist Shelby Davis.

A successful mutual funds investor, Davis believes the first step to creating global leaders is to nurture cross-cultural understanding on U.S. campuses. His needs-based scholarship program supports thousands of promising undergraduates from abroad each year at American public and private universities. UF has been onboard with that mission since 2005, five years after the Davis UWC Scholars program was launched, and covers half of each student’s cost of attendance, making UF a partner in creating global leaders. When UF suspended on-campus classes in mid-March and urged students to return home, 53 of this year’s 149 Davis Scholars decided to stay put. Some could not afford the last-minute plane fares to their far-flung homes, such as Sarajevo and Kathmandu. Others did not want to risk airport infections or the uncertainties of being able to re-enter the U.S. at some unspecified future date.

And so, despite the pain of being apart from their families, the remaining Davis Scholars agreed to shelter in place, turning the deserted Gainesville campus into a mini-United Nations.

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As the last of March’s azaleas shed their petals, the “left behind” Davis Scholars adjusted to a radically different UF experience: one with wide-open, empty plazas, locked buildings and quiet streets that once hummed with honking scooters and rushing students.

Throughout the spring, these Davis Scholars settled into a new normal — one of back-to-back Zoom lectures, polite waves at a distance and occasional forays to Walmart and Publix for essentials. Mealtimes at Gator dining halls — with glimpses of fellow Davis Scholars — took on a new significance: “It’s now the highlight of the day, walking to the Reitz lawn!” joked Durgesh Jha, a freshman physics major from Nepal, in an April interview.

The public health crisis was powerful, but so, they discovered, was their will to keep working toward their degrees as one big Gator family.

Here are stories of four Davis United World College Scholars from this past semester.

**El Salvador**

WHEN HOME IS 8,300 MILES AWAY

Yehya Haj

8,300 MILES AWAY

BY THE NUMBERS

$20 MILLION

Shelby Davis’ contributions to UF since 2005, paying for Davis United World College Scholars to attend.

149

International Davis Scholars enrolled at UF this year. They hail from 60 different countries.

25

United World College schools worldwide that partner with the Davis program to offer students an international baccalaureate degree before they continue their studies at a four-year college.

$25,000

Amount granted annually to each Davis Scholar at UF to cover their expenses (up $5,000 from previous years’ grants).

100%

Percentage of Davis UWC Scholars who are in the UF Honors Program.

30

Age of Shelby Davis when he left his post at Bank of New York to start his own mutual fund company. The son of self-made insurance broker-dealer Shelby Davis Sr. inherited little from his father’s $900 million fortune, but gained his father’s skill for growing wealth and adopted his father’s personal mantra: “Learn, Earn, Return,” which emphasizes large-scale philanthropy.

2017

Year Davis said: “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. Maybe, as we integrate the world, we can have a better chance of having global peace.”
LOVING UF CULTURE: “WE’RE SO TIGHT”

Davis UWC Scholar Lejla Ramić was born in 1998, just three years after the end of a brutal war that left 100,000 dead in her homeland of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Today she is flourishing as a third-year bioengineering student at UF. That would not be possible if she had stayed in Bosnia, she said recently.

“Back home, there is only one university where they teach this field,” the 21-year-old said.

But her current proximity to the latest STEM research isn’t the only reason Ramić loves UF. This studious, high-achiever is wild about Gator athletics.

“When you are at a game and you see all orange and blue, and everybody is cheering, ‘Go Gators,’ it’s so amazing!” she added. “Everyone is united in the same spirit.”

Ramić’s journey to UF began in 2016 when she was chosen to attend United World College Mostar near Sarajevo. When she was 18, she had earned her International Baccalaureate diploma. At age 19, based on her academic and personal merits, she became a Davis Scholar and flew them to Victoria, Canada. There, at one of many former hangouts, she worked as technical staff at the O’Dome or The Swamp.

In her spare time, she loves cooking dinner for her friends, including her favorite comfort food, trahana soup, made with fermented grains. She was looking forward to sharing new dishes after spring break — and then the pandemic led to students moving out in mid-March, leaving him and his roommate — another Davis Scholar, from Nigeria — behind.

“I used to enjoy ... seeing all the UF students to have any health-related complications.”

Students far from Gainesville may miss UF life, but Quiteño says the campus is radically transformed under lockdown.

“I used to enjoy ... seeing all the UF traffic because everybody here is so different,” he said. “I like seeing faces — it’s like the spice of life. Now it’s empty.”

Despite the difficult time, he takes comfort that the Davis Scholars Program has his back and those of other scholars.

“It fills my heart”

“Thank God we are healthy. It would be particularly complicated for us as international students to have any health-related complications.”

Four years ago, Emilio Quiteño was just this Salvadoran kid,” he said, sitting wide-eyed in his grandma’s living room, listening to his mother’s friend explain how her son was able to study abroad for free — first in Norway and then at NYU Abu Dhabi — thanks to a full-ride international scholarship program.

On the friend’s urging, hard-working Quiteño applied, but he was deeply skeptical of his chances.

“When you are at a game and you see all orange and blue, and everybody is cheering, ‘Go Gators,’ it’s so amazing!”

“Thank you for everything — live somewhere else, get a great education — but it sounded almost crazy,” he said. “I mean, it was like someone telling you they became an astronaut and walked on Mars. ‘Great on them, but that’s never going to happen to me.’”

Much to his surprise, the UWC board accepted him and several other promising students from El Salvador and flew them to Victoria, Canada. There, at one of 18 preparatory institutions around the world in the UWC movement, Quiteño spent two years honing his English skills and earning an International Baccalaureate diploma. At age 19, based on his academic and personal merits, he received a Davis UWC Scholarship to attend UF. Now in his second year at UF, he is welcoming new students as a Preview Staffer, too — a role that convinced him to stay on campus this spring.

“Thank God we are healthy,” said Quiteño. “It would be particularly complicated for us as international students to have any health-related complications.”

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Despite the difficult time, he takes comfort that the Davis Scholars Program has his back and those of other scholars.

“It fills your heart, even if you can’t go out on certain days because of the quarantine,” he said. “When you close your eyes at night, you know that because of Mr. Davis, this Salvadorian kid is able to study at UF and not worry about tuition or food or housing. It has drastically changed what I can aspire to in my life.”
LEBANON

“MY FAMILY WOULD HAVE NEVER BEEN ABLE TO AFFORD TUITION FOR ME. WITHOUT THE DAVIS SCHOLARSHIP, I WOULD NOT HAVE GONE TO COLLEGE.”

VILLAGE LIFE TO SUPersonic TRAVEL

Part of a large Lebanese family, third-year mechanical engineering student Yehya Haj says he is the first on his father’s side to attend college. “They didn’t really finish their education,” said Haj, whose father works in construction. “So [my being a student at UF] is a big thing.”

Most Lebanese people remain in the same village all their lives, he explained. Few care to venture outside the support system of their extended family. But Haj, who early on showed an aptitude for science and an eagerness to experience new ways of life, was different. The UWC recruiters who interviewed him at age 16 for IB preparatory school recognized that spark. “I really didn't mind which school they picked for me,” he remembered. “All I cared about was the education and the personal development.”

A chance remark that he liked snow outdoors activities landed him at UWC Red Cross Nordic, at the end of a fjord in Norway. There, as well as skiing, snowboarding and impromptu jam sessions, evenings would find them gathered by the lake near Simpson Hall for a cappella with a group of friends. “Music has helped me connect with new people,” he said. “I have never been able to afford tuition for me. Without the Davis Scholarship I would not have gone to college.”

Looking to the future, he says once he has achieved success in his field, he wants to support students who otherwise would not be able to afford to go to college — paying forward the Shelby Davis motto, “Learn, Earn, Return.”

“Back in Bosnia, there were hills all around, but here, when you see the sunset without the hills, the horizon seems much wider,” he said. “Your life really takes a turn when your dreams come true.”

“Your life really takes a turn when your dreams come true.”

DURGESH JHA

LEBANON

“My family would have never been able to afford tuition for me. Without the Davis Scholarship, I would not have gone to college.”

“Your life really takes a turn when your dreams come true.”

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