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When You Have a Chance to Influence the Universe...

By Todd Dagenais
UCF Forum columnist
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It's incredibly ironic to me that the University of Central Florida was started in 1963 near the nation's spaceport to help support the exploration of the universe – and now we find ourselves in a position as the nation's second-largest university to exert a great deal of influence on our own little piece of that universe.

I came to UCF from the University of Southern California almost eight years ago. Even my closest friends told me I was crazy for foregoing opportunities at other institutions with rich academic and athletic traditions and taking a position at an upstart “directional school.” That is a term some people use to minimize an institution with “West,” “Central” or some other geographic-direction modifier in its name, which they say pointedly devalues the school as not being a particular state's flagship university.

I knew I had a good reason why I accepted the job, but at the time I was unable to put it into words.

I had an instinctive gut feeling from the moment I stepped on campus. It was a feeling that many people have when they're searching. I knew that UCF would be my new home and Orlando would be the place my wife, Katie, and I were going to raise our children.

Having already coached volleyball teams in the Big 10 and Pac 12, I had been surrounded by tradition as I walked through the hallowed hallways of those marvelous institutions. The spirit and black-and-white pictures of the institutional scholars and high-achieving athletes almost evoked a ghostly feeling. Those hallways have been part of a lot of history, and walking through them is like walking through a historical museum. I often found my mind drifting back to their day and age.

But I didn't come to UCF to follow in the footsteps of 150 years of history; after all, the school hadn't even turned 50 by the time I arrived here.

I came to UCF because I wanted to be the one to help *write* the history.

I wanted to be surrounded by people who are in the process of creating that history. In the time I have been at UCF I have seen beautiful academic buildings rise from sandy fields. I have watched an institution grow into one of the nation's greatest providers of qualified employee candidates. I've seen many of our distinguished faculty members become the nation's leading experts in their specific fields or research or study.

To all of us who are a part of UCF – which has grown to about 61,000 students – every day you go to class or your job, you are writing history, too, You are living the stories and taking the pictures that others will talk about and see in the future; you are taking the pictures they will stare at some day. We will be those ghosts in the hallways 100 years from now.

Writing history is an important responsibility; it's our duty to do it with care and diligence. With that in mind:

We will not be defined by our size, we will be defined by how we use it.

We will be leaders who fearlessly carve our own pathways.

We will reach out to our community because we need them as partners.

We will respect and never forget where we came from, or the people who have worked tirelessly to get us here.

We will be bold and brave and challenge tradition.

We will challenge ourselves and each other to be the “first in history to_____.”

We will look backward with pride, and forward with unbridled optimism.

On one side we are the fortunate ones who get to forge our destiny, on the other we must embrace the tremendous corresponding duty and responsibility.

Todd Dagenais is UCF's head volleyball coach. He can be reached attdagenais@athletics.ucf.edu.

