

Univ and the Devas Club



"Who's that?" I asked. Half-recognising a face from years ago as we boarded the bus to Oxford.

"Athena", one of the lead youth workers at the Devas Club answered me, "Don't you recognise him?" she laughed. "That's one of our Devas boys grown up into a good young man."

Once a year, the Devas youth club in South West London takes a coach-full of young people to University College Oxford. The youth club was founded by Jocelyn Devas, a student at University College Oxford, in 1884, as a "Club for Working Lads" with the aim of providing young men with job skills.

Five years ago I was a student at University College. Since graduating, I moved to West London and have become a weekly visitor to the Devas Club. I would like to take this opportunity to reflect on the relationship between these communities.

University College Oxford is a safe and happy place. Since leaving Oxford, my experience at the Devas Club has been the very same. Allow me a moment to explain why I do not think the similarities end there.

At the heart of both communities can be found the same principle reason for existing: the creation and facilitation of an environment in which young people can grow to reach their full potential. We must foster these educational communities, expanding minds and horizons with an education that does justice to the phenomenal minds of the young people in both communities.

Likewise, the young people of both communities face the same challenges. They are worried about their job prospects in the current climate, they must adjust to learning in a virtual forum, they must accept that

they will miss out on many of the everyday experiences that we realise only now were in fact privileges that could be taken away.

Whilst recognising the similarities, we must also think of the differences. As we toured University College with the young people from the Devas, led by University College student tour guides, I thought about what a reverse visit would look like. I imagined the awe, the wonder, the nervousness, the frustration of Univ students touring the Devas Club, getting a brief insight into a rich world that was so unlike their own. We often overlook the fascinating similarities that can be found in our reactions to perceived differences.

We must realise and celebrate the vital similarities of these communities whilst developing our understanding of their differences. What does that mean in practice? It means studying Kano lyrics in Modernism tutorials, studying the rhythms of romantic poetry in Devas dance classes, listening to young Londoners spit fire in the Devas recording booth over classical violin, listening to Univ choral scholars play the organ with the emotional fervour of grime lyricism.

It would mean assigning our nation's brightest minds to help solve the national disgrace of London's knife crime and the systemic issues that must be addressed to stop the sacrifice of young people by a society that chooses to vilify and scapegoat in order to distract from its inability to enable.

We can learn so much from each other. We must explain to the young people in both communities that Oxford tutorials require both slow and quick thinking. I am equally sure that the young people at the Devas club could teach Univ students about quick thinking just as the Univ students would impart to the Devas young people the importance of slow, meticulous, academic concentration.

I have allowed myself to be carried away by the promise of possibility. We must now return to a stark reality that is far from any ideal.

Our communities face the same threats. There is a fundamental threat to the relationship of these overlapping communities and it is the threat to the Devas Club itself. There is no need to cite the graphs, the charts, the statistics that show that cuts to government funding have had a direct impact on the community level and have been especially damaging in the youth work sector. Instead, I would like you to imagine for a moment the scenario whereby tutors in Oxford were told they were no longer allowed to remain assigned to an individual college, but would have to solely teach at a campus-wide faculty level. Imagine the response of the university community: the crushing sadness that the care and intimate level of teaching they receive in a tutorial environment would be no more. Imagine, the heart of the college system ripped from the college. The Devas club is facing this threat under the guise that resources are being consolidated at a borough-wide level. Make no mistake, do not listen to those that will try to argue otherwise, as a weekly visitor to the club, this is a directly harmful act. It will mean the club does not have the financial resources to run a full service. The Devas will no longer be able to provide the young people with a free-space to learn, to laugh, to grow.

I believe, because of their shared principles, if you value the community of University College, you must defend the community around the Devas with the same ardent vigour. It is a matter of belonging and there are few things more vital to happy human life.

We enter into what will undoubtedly be a long and difficult battle for national and global recovery. Now, more than ever, it will be all too easy to forget the plight of others because of our own newfound difficulties. However, as we tend towards prioritising individual interests, we start to renege on our social promises. If we reduce, perhaps even abandon, our communal obligations, we forget our social responsibilities and we compound the difficulties of those in need of our support. We must not allow this new normal of social distancing to compound racial differences, to enforce class divisions, to uphold cultural intolerances. We must recognise that, as always has been, we prioritise individuality to our collective peril.

This is a plea for community, in all its wonderful kaleidoscope of influence, plurality of connections. We must foster our own communities and encourage mutual understanding of others, cherishing reciprocity of influence and two-way inspiration.

The themes in this short piece are indeed themes we must return to year on year, time and time again. These themes are the very reason why the Devas Club will continue to make its annual trip to Oxford. Let us ensure we make certain the ties between our communities are as strong and prosperous throughout the year as they are when Devas and Univ meet face to face.

The two communities share a crest. We must continue to give our young people the wings of the martlet, so they can take flight to wherever they please. We owe the preservation of these communities to all of our young people, in Battersea and in Oxford.

Thank you for reading this article. Unfortunately, I cannot say I am hopeful for the future of this relationship. I fear for the fate of the Devas club. This worry brings me bitter sadness as I feel the same sense of pride in the Devas community that I'm sure you and I both feel in our Univ network. It will become easier to live apart, but we must now, more than ever, come together in any way we can.

After Jocelyn Devas' death from a climbing accident in Zermatt in 1886, his father offered a substantial endowment if his college friends would carry on the work in Battersea. College friends, there is work to be done and we must all get to work immediately, in any way we can, or an institution we should all be proud of will perish.

If you are a member of the University College Community and would like to find out more about the Devas Youth Club in Battersea, please feel free to contact me: johndinneen5@gmail.com

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