

KU

School of Languages, Literatures & Cultures

The University of Kansas

College of Liberal Arts & Sciences

1st Anniversary Convocation

September 1, 2016

3:00 PM

Ball Room Kansas Union

Keynote Address

Clinton O. Robinson PE FACEC

Associate Vice President, Director of State & Local Government Affairs

Black & Veatch

Good afternoon! Greetings Chancellor(s), Dean, Faculty, Students, Sponsors and lifelong learners! Marc, thank you for that kind introduction.

As you may have inferred from the introduction, KU has been the Robinson home for a long time. You can say it all started before KU's inception in 1865 when my great grandfather, David Hamilton Robinson, decided to come to the free state of Kansas in the late 1860s from his comfortable surroundings in Westport, NY to become a jayhawker. Once the civil war ended we Kansans could establish the University of Kansas as a beacon of light on Mount Oread. It was almost 150 years ago to the day (11 days from today) on September 12, 1866 when we had our first day of classes in Old North College and the gentleman standing at the top of the steps in that historic photo resembling Abraham Lincoln preparing to teach Greek and Latin was Professor Robinson. Not only were my family ties established then with the university but apparently my love for language, literature and culture were maybe more a function of nature than nurture.

I can point to three high school educators who helped shape my life and started me on this path. Senora Nora Pinkston taught me to love the Spanish language, all of it. Long hours with vocabulary, conjugation and conversation really paid off.

The Spanish novel, Don Quixote de La Mancha, increased my love for reading and

taught me to dig a little deeper into the meaning of words. She is honestly the reason I stand before you today because she instilled in me something I would not benefit from for years to come. Then there was Everett Reece who was always prepared with some classic literature when I offered Robert Ludlum as my reading of choice. He loved to engage in difficult topics which gave me some appreciation for civil discord and rhetoric which both serve me well today. Last but certainly not least was Ray Runyan who introduced me to calculus but was maybe best known for wearing a different tie to class every day of the year. I was ready to give up on math altogether which is hard for a professional engineer to admit, but he wisely said to me that although my skills in math were not superior, it was what I would have to offer the profession that is different than the others that would define my success. This was later validated by my water resources professor at KU, Bob Smith, who said “Clint, I know engineering is hard for you but the engineering profession will be better off if you persevere.” Needless to say I did not believe him at the time.

Not only am I a legacy of KU but I am a legacy of a lot of things. My great uncle was Nathaniel Thomas “N.T.” Veatch who not only received his engineering degree from KU, he was one of the founders of Black & Veatch. It is now one of the largest critical human infrastructure engineering and construction companies

in the world. NT was married to Amarette Weaver and my grandfather, David Beach Robinson, was married to her sister, Aileen Weaver. I know it sounds complicated but they were both descendants, along with their brother Art, of A.D. Weaver, the founder of Weaver's Department store here in Lawrence at 9th and Massachusetts. In later years my uncle, Thomas Bullene Robinson (KU Engineering graduate), would replace NT Veatch as the Managing Partner of B&V. Sure enough, my father, John Hamilton Robinson (KU Engineering Graduate), would become the next Managing Partner of B&V. Needless to say as a young upstart I said I would never attend KU, study engineering, and for goodness sake I would never work at Black & Veatch! Now I am proud to say I have both a BSCE and an MSCE from KU and I have worked at B&V for 32 years!

My first ten years at Black & Veatch were pretty typical for the time. My boss, Dave Hunt, was grooming me to open an office in Chicago, IL and we mutually agreed I needed another year or two of water and wastewater engineering in the Illinois, Kansas and Missouri markets to be ready. One day, he advised me that I was one of many being considered to open an office in Miami, FL. My pregnant wife, Britton (a KU graduate in Industrial Organizational Psychology), my 3 year old daughter and I considered the opportunity and I kindly declined the offer to my boss. Not more than an hour after that message went up the food chain I got

a call from our division president inviting me to his office. He explained that my job was in Miami so he wondered if now I wanted to go there! He said that my understanding of the Spanish language and culture made me a perfect candidate for Southeast Florida and Latin America in addition to my skills as a civil environmental engineer. The direct approach and a little flattery worked and off we went. The first night after spending an arduous day setting up the office I pampered myself with a drive through at the nearby McDonalds. I was greeted over the speaker with “Bienvenidos a McDonald’s que quiere para comer?” to which I responded without hesitation “Por favor quiero un numero dos con papas fritas y una coca cola”. Now that wasn’t so hard was it? It was clear that Spanish would be the dominant language in Miami (pronounced Me Ami). Lots of great Miami and Southeast Florida adventures and stories that will have to wait for the reception.

Little did I know how valuable two KU degrees, a passport, and a love for language, literature and culture would be? The three amigos, Eliu Perez, Julian Sandino (both KU Engineering Graduates) and I would soon find ourselves “chasing windmills” in Latin America. Eliu would find the work, Julian would define the work and I would do the work. We were very successful! Since that start I have traveled to every country in Latin America with the exceptions of

Venezuela, Suriname, Guyana and Bolivia. That is not to say we did not do work there, I just didn't visit. I have also worked in Mexico, Central America and the Caribbean. As a result I am well versed on needs, not necessarily resources to satisfy those needs.

This wasn't the first rodeo for Black & Veatch in Spanish speaking countries. We were responsible for a major water treatment facilities in Bogota, Colombia called El Sapo in the 70's. I have been reminded by Julian Sandino (who is Colombian) that Colombian Spanish is the best! I think my Peruvian Spanish instructor, Nora Pinkston, might have vigorously argued that Peruvian is the best.

In the 70's as well, we helped Bacardi discover that they could anaerobically digest their waste sugars from making rum and turn the off gas of methane into a useable fuel to make more rum! We have had a healthy and fun relationship with Puerto Rico for water and wastewater ever since.

I had dreams that all of my experiences would be this rosy but it was not to be! Let me share a few lessons learned and then let you get back to your program.

Lima Peru is wonderful place unless your perception was one of Machu Picchu's lush green mountaintops and valleys. The only green vegetation in all of Lima is

where you can afford the water. Imagine Las Vegas without water. We entered our first meeting with Sedepal at the water treatment plant through two secured gates such that it appeared like Fort Knox. This project occurred before we began discussing a serious water shortage in the United States in earnest and I got a vision of what might be to come in our country. The old adage “Whiskey is for drinking; Water is for fighting over” – Anonymous (attributed at times to Mark Twain but not validated) was not only true for the western United States but also true for one of the most arid places in the world, western Peru and northwestern Chile. The only real difference is that pisco is their whiskey and their national drink is the pisco sour. Something as precious and important to life as water was not prevalent to all in need in Lima.

Language, literature and culture truth number one, water is life!

You would think that a city of 4 million people in Santiago Chile in 1994 would have suitable wastewater treatment. In fact they had none if it were not for Mother Nature. They have two major tributaries that flow from the Andes through Santiago, El Rio Maipo and El Rio Maipo. Ironically the Maipo is their drinking water and the Maipo is their sewage collector. Mother Nature had been doing a good job presuming a reasonable dilution factor from the snow melt from

the Andes and a smaller wastewater contribution from the city. There is ample space and time on the way to beautiful Valparaiso Chile to naturally clean wastewater BUT in the summer there was little snow melt and the concentrations of wastewater was approaching 95% by volume of the river. This is also where the less fortunate would gather along the river banks and relied on the river for drinking water, bathing and recreation. This became a national health crisis as you might imagine and the president authorized the first of three 132 million gallons per day tertiary wastewater treatment plants. I was so proud! At our first public meeting I actually expected the citizens to physically embrace us for this life-saving facility. I quickly realized the crowd was armed with pitchforks and torches (not literally but I could feel it in their hearts) to protect the status quo. No one had bothered to tell me and Dr. Sandino that El Rio Maipo was a great resource of nitrogen and phosphorous fertilizers that had been flowing via diversion aqueducts into the fields of very large strawberries and other agriculture. When they learned they would still get the water but the nutrients would be removed to preserve the health of the stream they were incensed. The compromise was subsidized trucks from the government that would deliver dry decontaminated nutrients from our wastewater plant and spread it at the feet of their plantings. When asked about the waterborne diseases in the field they were experiencing

they responded callously that there was some infection and death but there were also plenty of workers!

Language, literature and culture lesson number two, one man's waterborne disease is another man's fertilizer.

Last but certainly not least I want to talk about Buenos Aires Argentina. Being a good Kansan and the husband of a Kansas cattle ranchers' granddaughter I am reluctant to say that their beef was the best but it was pretty darn good. I experienced every part of the cow cooked with great care in some instances over a whole day. Rinones sounds like a real treat until you eat it and someone then explains you are eating kidneys. I am no doctor but I have a pretty clear understanding what the cleansing powers of kidneys are and doubted they were meant to be consumed. My superiors may have thought my purpose in Buenos Aires at this point was questionable at best with each expense report that would cross their desk. We were, however, performing one of the world's largest river environmental cleanups in El Rio Reconquista flowing through the heart of Buenos Aires and ending naturally at La Boca where the Italians first settled in Argentina. This was an important project not only to clean the contaminated sediment in the river but what else we might dredge up along the way.

Occasionally we would have to stop production because we would find what might be classified as human remains. I never saw it but I read the reports. It was not a surprise then when I learned about something euphemistically called the Plaza de los Desaparecidos (Plaza of the Disappeared) across the street from the Casa Rosada (the Pink House and home of the president) that was filled with chalk outlines of missing dissidents. I would venture out on the weekends with a brown lunch sack filled with individually wrapped chocolates, sit on one end of a park bench, read a book (probably Robert Ludlum, sorry Mr. Reece) and visit with whomever would choose to share a chocolate and a conversation. I had been told “Debes comprar un porteno para lo que vale y se vende para lo que cree que vale” which translates “you should buy someone from Buenos Aires for what they are worth and sell them for what they think they are worth” which always made me chuckle. In this instance, however, the painful stories they would share with me on that park bench made my work there so much more rewarding and significant.

Language, literature and culture wisdom number three, never judge a book by its cover.

There is so much left to tell but my time has come to an end. I leave you all with a challenge. Find and nurture the next Clint Robinson. He/she may be studying engineering, business, law and medicine but they need your passion in language literature, and culture to make them whole, to make them a better person. Quit preaching to the choir and go find some students in other disciplines that need your help!

In closing, I thank my great grandfather David Hamilton Robinson for founding the language department back in 1865 and the over 75 relatives of mine that have crossed this hill. I hope that someday this university will place a statue of David Hamilton Robinson in a place where students from all over the world can celebrate the foundation of KU with language, literature and culture for all!

Thank you for inviting me here today to speak with you all, may your year be noteworthy and ROCK.....CHALK.....JAYHAWK!