

Distinguished Alumnus Award Response

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Mr President, Ladies and Gentleman, it gives me great honor to accept this award as a Distinguished Alumnus of the Civil and Environmental Engineering Department of the University of Illinois. I would like to acknowledge faculty colleagues from the Hydrosystems Laboratory who are here this evening: Marcelo García, Ximing Cai, Murugesu Sivapalan, and Al Valocchi, and also Praveen Kumar, who was unable to attend. Thank you for your friendship.

My wife Helen is also here tonight. We were newly-weds when she came to Urbana-Champaign in 1973, on a cool February evening 38 years ago today! Helen is also a University of Illinois graduate, with a Masters in Science Education. Illinois welcomed us with open arms and made us feel part of the Land of Lincoln. We have felt that welcome again this evening.

When I was growing up in New Zealand, the academic ideal was very British – Oxford and Cambridge. However, while I was an undergraduate student at the University of Canterbury, I realized that our engineering textbooks came from American universities, including Illinois, and I resolved to pursue my graduate education there. I arrived at the University of Illinois in the Fall semester of 1972, and I was one of the last PhD students of a great Civil Engineering Professor, Ven Te Chow. I subsequently dedicated my “Handbook of Hydrology” to him as “Scholar, Teacher, Author, Friend”.

I vividly recall my first days on campus, mixing with the international graduate student community in Daniels Hall at 1010 West Green St. I remember my first visit to the Hydrosystems Laboratory, sitting in Dr Chow’s office in a little chair next to his desk. I was just 22 years old. In a flash, my world had been transformed from a quiet life in a small country very far away, to mixing in a global community at the forefront of learning. It was a unique, life-changing experience, one that I’ll never forget.

Whenever I return to Urbana-Champaign, I try to visit the Alma Mater statue, with its wonderful dedication “To thy happy children of the future, those of the past send greetings”. I walk through the Illini Union and into the Main Quad. I think of the great tradition of liberal education at the University of Illinois that forty years ago reached out and touched me far across the sea, enabling me to add my contribution to civil engineering knowledge, to write books to carry that learning to the farthest corners of the earth, and thus to return to the world the precious gift that was given to me of a graduate education in Civil Engineering at the University of Illinois. Thank you.