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Intercultural Dossier

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Intercultural Dossier

How my time abroad has changed my perception of the United States and opened up new perspectives

XY

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Quick Overview

- **Place and Country:** Chicago, United States
- **Volunteering Place:** XY
- **Time and Duration:** XY
- **Contact Person:** XY

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1. Introduction

1.1. How I ended up volunteering for XY in Chicago

During my time in high school, I have always dreamed about going abroad and living in a different country for a longer period of time. After I finished school, I applied for an international volunteering program, and I was accepted at XY in Chicago. XY is a non-governmental organization that offers homeless people and people in need food and shelter. The volunteers worked either in a soup kitchen or in an overnight shelter. Two weeks before my adventure in the United States started, I was able to get to know some of my German co-volunteers and



roommates during a two-week long preparation workshop. We were all very excited but nervous at the same time and then shortly after the workshop I was sitting on the plane on my way to Chicago to start my volunteering experience.

1.2. My expectations about going abroad to the United States

I grew up in a very small town in Northern Germany. Before my year abroad in Chicago, I have never been away from home for a longer period of time. Thus, it was a very big step for me to decide to leave my comfort zone to go aboard and live in a different country, work full-time, share an apartment with people my age, and adapt to a foreign culture and language. When I started my volunteering experience, I had different types of expectations. Concerning my educational expectations, I wanted to improve my English because the skills I learned in high school were not sufficient. The time in Chicago gave me the perfect opportunity to practice English daily. At that time, I did not really know who I wanted to become or what I wanted to study in the future. It was one of the major reasons why I decided to go abroad in the first place. Concerning my personal expectations, I wanted to get to know the culture, the people, and the United States as a country itself. I only had limited knowledge of the US from high school and pop-culture. Before I came to the US, I thought that it was a very prosperous and wealthy country that had major influences on politics, pop-culture, and the film, media and music industry. Furthermore, my view of the United States was heavily influenced by stereotypes. I thought that everyone had a gun and a big truck. From movies I knew that there was an abundance of shopping malls and amusement parks. Moreover, I knew that the US and especially the major cities like Chicago or New York are very diverse because they are

considered as melting pots of cultures with different ethnical backgrounds. Apart from all the expectations above, I also wanted to engage with a new culture, meet new people, travel, and explore the country and this way get to know myself better.

1.3. A typical day at XY

As mentioned above, some of the volunteers worked at the local soup kitchen and the others at the overnight shelter. I worked twelve-hour night shifts from 6 p.m. till 6 a.m. at the overnight shelter for three days a week. My night shift consisted of three parts. The first part was the preparation of the sleeping dorms, the attendance list, showers, towels, and other hygiene products, which will later be distributed to the guests.

As soon as everything was prepared, the supervisor began to let in our guests for the night. At the same time, I was sitting at a desk in the dorm and began to register the guests and give them their bed number for the night. Later, after everyone was registered, I turned the lights off at 10 p.m. and took my one-hour break. After my first break, the second part of my shift started. The shelter hosted around 250 male guests and 50 female guests each night. So, my job for the next seven hours was to watch our guests, solve problems and conflicts and let in the people that came in later from work and



thus, had a reserved bed that was not given away at the door earlier. Furthermore, I engaged in interesting conversations with some of our guests. At 3 a.m. the cook came in who started preparing breakfast. Then, at 4 a.m. I took my second break, before turning on the lights at 5 a.m. In the morning my third part of the shift started. After turning on the lights, the guests had one hour to leave the shelter. During that time, they had to make their bed, check out at the desk, and get breakfast and lunch to go. This was the best time of the shift because everyone was awake and ready to start their day. At 6 a.m. usually everyone has left the dorms and my shift was over.

In my opinion the working environment gave me the perfect opportunity to get to know so many people from different social and ethnical backgrounds and engage in interesting and informative conversations with them. I learned a lot about racism, institutionalized discriminatory practices, social injustice and was able to critically reflect and break down my personal stereotypes of the US and its culture, people, and socio-political structures. What and

in which way exactly my thoughts, expectations, and stereotypes changed will be discussed in the main part of this dossier.

2. Main Part – How did my time abroad change my perception of the United States?

In the introduction, I have displayed my personal expectations and beliefs of the US before working for XY. In the following section I want to present three different aspects that have changed my perception of the US, broadened my horizon, and opened up new perspectives and ways of thinking for me personally.

2.1. The myth of the “American Dream”

Hollywood blockbusters like the *Great Gatsby* or the simple yet incredible success stories of Steve Jobs or Mark Zuckerberg are only a few examples of the achievements that symbolize the “American Dream”. Before I came to the US, I had only heard of the American Dream from movies, but I did not really know what it was. Later, I learned that it is “the belief that America offers the opportunity to everyone of a good and successful life achieved through hard work” (“The American Dream”). But is this really true?

During my night shifts at the overnight shelter, I met one of our regular guests XY. XY was a chef at a restaurant during the day and a cab driver at night. XY, who had worked the entire night, came in at 3 a.m. and woke up at 5 a.m. with the other guests and went to work at the restaurant. Before working at the shelter, I thought that everyone who had a job automatically had a place to live. I asked XY, why he still lives in the shelter although he has several jobs. He told me that the earned money is not sufficient to pay rent in an expensive city like Chicago, and that he still must pay for old hospital bills. I was shocked because XY is a hard-working person who puts work before sleep and rest. Thus, he embodies the definition of a person worthy of achieving financial success and homeownership through the American Dream. Nevertheless, he would never achieve it because the American Dream is not a belief, a lifegoal that everyone in the US can or is meant to achieve by creating a certain attitude towards work, success, and performance.

It is rather the “premier and lasting American myth” (Archer 7). Today “more than 15 percent of the nation’s population is living below the poverty level, (...) there is no economic justice for all” (Combs 228). The encounter with XY and many others at the shelter has helped me understand that hard work only is not sufficient to achieve the American Dream, since privilege, whiteness, a person’s social and ethnical background play a huge role in achieving financial success. Thus, for many people in the US, the myth remains only what it is: a myth.

2.2. The 4th of July as the climax of American patriotism and hypocrisy

The 4th of July, also known as Independence Day, is a national holiday celebrated all around the United States every year. My year abroad was slowly coming to an end, but I could still experience this holiday that reflects the American culture very well. On this day, everyone was in a festive mood and wanted to celebrate. After working a shift, the night before, I woke up to



the sound of fireworks going off close to our house. My roommates were already preparing homemade deep-dish pizza, which is considered a typical Chicago delicacy. Since the 4th of July celebrates historically the United States' independence from the UK in 1776, many people today celebrate American culture and pride. After eating pizza together, we went to see the 4th of July parade. The parade was composed of various parade floats, an orchestra walking on the streets, people dressed in red, blue, and white carrying the US

flag and big “American” trucks overwhelmingly decorated in the US colors driving down the street. Later, we went to see the fireworks at Lake Michigan to close our day. Before I came to the US, I knew that Americans in general are very proud of their country. But this day symbolized the climax of American nationalism and patriotism. Personally, it was very strange to see people celebrating their country in such an extent, because I was not used to this in Germany. On the one hand I really enjoyed the day off, the mood and the festivities on the streets, but on the other hand I realized that one has to reflect this day and this



representation of US culture critically. A couple of days before, I talked to some of the guests in the shelter about the 4th of July and they were afraid to go out on the streets during that day. I was surprised because I thought they would be happy to celebrate. But instead, they told me that during the 4th of July there are many shootings, especially in the poor neighborhoods in Chicago, because the frequent sound of fireworks covers the sound of guns. Furthermore, the police are primarily focused on the festivities in downtown or the richer neighborhoods. I was shocked because on the one hand privileged people celebrate American culture and frankly,

guns play an important role in American culture. On the other hand, minorities or low-income folks are hurt or even killed during that day with the tools that the others are so proudly celebrating. I could not wrap my head around this hypocritical paradox of American culture. Moreover, the news does not talk about the shootings happening in the low-income neighborhoods as if the people there did not matter or are not important enough to interrupt the celebratory mood. I realized that the 4th of July, like so many things in the US, is a holiday that cannot be enjoyed by everyone equally. While privileged people celebrate, others have to fear their lives. For me personally, this holiday not only represents American patriotism, but also social injustice and a type of institutionalized discrimination.

2.3. “Taste of Chicago” – The world’s biggest food festival

During the summer months, Chicago had a lot to offer. In the beginning of July, I went to the “Taste of Chicago” food festival. It is considered the world’s biggest food festival and takes place in Grant Park in downtown Chicago. The festival had booths with all different kinds of foods from different countries. There were not only a lot of families, but also a lot of young people enjoying the festivities. In my opinion, the festival represented the diversity of cultures living in the US together through food. There were local Mexican or Brazilian Americans preparing traditional dishes to share them with the community. I went to a booth with Argentinean delicacies and tried Empanadas for the first time. The people who were preparing the food asked me where I was from and were happy to hear that I am German and that I have never tried Argentinian traditional food before. They told



me their story about migrating to the US and finding comfort and a piece of home when cooking and sharing their meals. It was such a wonderful atmosphere illustrating the importance of intercultural exchange and getting to know new things from other places to broaden our own, sometimes only limited, perspective.

Later, I went to a Mexican booth and tried a very spicy, but delicious chickpea soup. Again, I engaged in a short conversation with them about their food. They told me that they had a Mexican restaurant very close to my neighborhood. Most of the time they serve Mexican Americans and speak

predominantly Spanish, even their menu is in Spanish, since only a few people from other cultural backgrounds visit their restaurant. In my opinion, this reflected the US very well. On the one hand the US is home to so many different people from various cultural backgrounds, but on the other hand these cultures are mostly separated from each other. There are neighborhoods with predominantly Mexican Americans, or Chinese Americans. The festival dissolved these geographical boundaries and created a space for intercultural exchange, which was truly wonderful.

3. Conclusion

Firstly, I found it very difficult to summarize all my thoughts, impressions and learning experiences in short. However, concerning my educational expectations, I have improved my English substantially. At the beginning of my time in Chicago, it was very difficult for me to talk with the supervisors, the guests of our facilities and the other native volunteers in English about every topic imaginable. But at the end I can say that I did not lack this proficiency and fluency anymore. Furthermore, thanks to the work at the shelter, I realized that I want to work with people in the future. I do not want to work in an office from 9 to 5. That is the reason why I decided to become a teacher and study English and XY at the University of Münster.

Also, I wanted to keep speaking English and learning more about the history, language, culture, and literature during my studies.

Concerning my personal expectations, I was able to learn so much about the US, its people, the culture and most importantly some very important socio-political issues that not only the US but also Germany is facing. At that time coming from my small-town perspective, I did not think a lot about the problems that the US was facing, especially concerning social injustice, racism, discrimination, violence, and police brutality against the African American community since I personally have never experienced and will never experience this kind of discrimination. Certainly, my time there has changed my perception, broadened my horizon, and helped me to look at things differently from other perspectives and not only from the one that I am used to. I started to question my eurocentric point of view and encountered problems of my personal values and views by looking back at my own culture from the outside. I learned how to look behind the obvious and understand my own privilege. Of course, there is still so much I can learn, and I am looking forward to gaining more knowledge through my studies and future internships.

The aspect that I liked most about my volunteering was engaging in interesting conversations with our guests at the shelter. It was such an enriching experience to hear their stories. Also, most of the people I worked with had a big heart and were very grateful for our work.

Problematic was the insufficient preparation in the US. We were basically thrown into our work without knowing what to expect. A preparational retreat or a workshop at the beginning of the service could be a solution for his problem.

However, I am incredibly grateful for this amazing experience because I was able to meet so many new people, experience a new culture, explore a new country, and learn so much about society, life and, most importantly, about myself.

4. Works Cited

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