

Crossing Borders:

How my international experience has affected my view of the world

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Ten years ago, when I was 14, I had to write an essay for my German class with the title “If I ruled the world”. I started the essay with the following words: “Imagine a world where people speak the same language everywhere. A world where religion doesn't matter, because everybody believes in one God. No body owns a passport, because there are no borders. No differences and therefore no reason to fight....”

As the idealistic 14-year old I was, I thought equality is the answer to all the problems in the world. Who would have thought that just ten years later, I will embrace diversity and everything that comes with it? Who would have thought that I will change my view through experiencing cultures I wasn't even aware of their existence?

It all started during my first adventure after graduating from high school. With 19, I traveled to Australia for six months. After a few weeks of struggling and being lonely, I made it to a place where I found a new home. This place was a hostel, which gave me a job at the reception. It offered me friends, which became my family and opened up my eyes for the world. I lived at this place for four months and found friends from all other the world, which are still an important part of my life. From the French security guy who became my best friend, to the American lifeguard, who influenced my decision in coming to North Carolina for an exchange year three years later. The list can go on for a while.

During this time I overcame the language barrier. I realized I can be friends with people from all over the world, despite different cultures, political world views or even language. I also became proficient in body language and signs, which are understood globally.

My journey to Australia made me curious for traveling the world. I became aware that there was so much more to the world than what I had seen so far and that discovering new cultures will enrich my personality.

During my stay here in Charlotte, I had some extraordinary experiences. I still find myself thinking about the 14-year old me and wish I could tell her about what was yet to come.

I remember a few situations, which are an example of how cultural exchanges changed my perception of right and wrong. Some of them are the experiences I made in the first six months of my time in North Carolina.

In the first two weeks, I went to have dinner at a friend's place. This friend showed me his gun collection and placed a rifle in my hands with the words: "This is German quality!" Funny enough, I never had a gun in my hand. Despite the general assumptions, not all Germans are gun lovers. This was the first time I was confronted with the American gun culture. I didn't know what to do, except of smiling and saying "Wow, is it loaded?". First shocked and frightened, I tried to change the subject. Later on, I told him I am not a fan of guns and that I would never have one in my house. We talked about the differences in our cultures and how he grew up with guns. I eventually understood that a gun owner in America is not similar to a crazy person which wants to kill people, which is the general view in Germany.

On a trip with the International Club to New York, a student from Saudi Arabia congratulated me for my German history with the words: "Hitler was a great man!" Again, I was shocked and tried to explain him that Germans don't see it this way. This part of German history is viewed as something rather to be ashamed of. He couldn't understand. It took us a while to realize that he never heard the whole story about what happened in Germany during the Hitler regime. He didn't know Hitler killed more than six million Jews and terrorized the country in many ways. After all, this wasn't part of the Saudi Arabian school curriculum. It showed me how much I was influenced by the Western society and therefore I assumed people from other countries have the same knowledge and perceptions. Even though, I didn't really know much about Saudi Arabian's history either, I assumed everybody knows about the German history. Since then, I learned that I should not mix up ignorance with an expression of ideology. I gave him a few books about the German history and changed his view completely, but he taught me a lot as well.

Part of what I loved about the U.S., was the diversity and racism seemed to me as not existing. One

night, I was out with a group of African American friends. They told me that they don't see me as a white girl, because I wouldn't behave like "normal" white people in the States. They accepted me as one of them and didn't define me through my skin color. However, they were still full of stereotypes about white people. This situation made me realize, despite my first impression, racial issues are still present in the United States. It also showed me how it feels to be part of a minority in a group.

Some of my experiences showed me that stereotypes are not always wrong, but the reason for them might differ to my conceptualization of right and wrong. Despite this, I learned that stereotypes never generally apply to every individual. I also learned that the Western culture is not the only culture in the world and definitely not the best. There is no right or wrong when it comes to culture. Foreign cultures and customs have their reason to exist and therefore are there to learn from.

If I could have the chance to talk to the younger me in just one sentence, I would say: "Embrace diversity, because there is always another side of a story!"