

YOUTH FOR UNDERSTANDING STIFTUNG

Speech by Jonathan Rabb

XV Enchanted Holiday Evening

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Well I never have actually tried public speaking before so I think it is kind of funny that my first prepared speech outside of school is to a group this big in New York City. But I like to try new things so here it goes:

My name is Jonathan Rabb. I am from Minneapolis, Minnesota, and I was the recipient of a full scholarship that sent me to Germany for a year. The scholarship money that I received came from this very event and I am glad that I can now be a part in helping youth just like me who, without help from people like you, would not be able to spend time making friends, learning, and exploring places they would never have dreamed of through the YFU Foundation's foreign exchange program.

Now at about this time two years ago I ran into the kitchen where my mom was eating and asked her if I could do a foreign exchange. She said that I could and told me that it would be great for me to do something like that. The problem was that that year my family was going through a lot of hardship. My father is in the US Army and was sent to Iraq while at the same time my parents were going through a very stressful divorce. The fact is, no way in the world would my mother have been able to pay the full amount to send me to another country for a year. A word of advice from my grandmamma that I think everyone can use. She used to say "Boy, don't you ever turn nothing down but yo collar." I applied for the scholarship, got it, and packed my bags for Germany.

Now I had been to Germany before but I had never picked the language up, because I was actually taking Spanish at my high school. I was so hyped up for everything that it never really occurred to me until the plane was about to land that I did not know any German. But that would soon change because for the first month I was sent to a small town named Satrup in Schleswig-Holstein, where I took an intense immersion course along with 4 other Americans, a boy named Anuj from New Delhi, India, and 5 kids from Thailand. We spent 8 hours a day everyday for a whole month learning German and preparing together for the months to come. I cried on our last day as we were split up and sent to our host families. I kept a diary and I quote myself from the day that I left "I am no longer protected by people that I know, now it is just me. I am not scared because I don't know what to be scared of."

I think that was the mindset that got me through, the idea that I should not waste my time being scared of that what I did not know. I experienced a lot of stuff, both good and bad, in the city of Papenburg that has in the end molded me into the person I am today.

My host family was actually from Omsk, Russia, and had left after the wall fell. They spoke German with me but usually Russian with each other. I am probably one of the only foreign exchange students who is actually able to say that he came there speaking no German and left speaking better than his host mom did! With my family I was pushed into a sort of double exchange where most of the German culture trivia that I had learned in the orientation was not usable at home because outside I was doing the German thing but as soon I walked into that door I had to switch into Russian customs.

Another thing that I was a little prepared for was something that I have been dealing with throughout my whole life. As everyone can see, my skin color is a little bit darker than the average German. I was shocked as my host brother was giving me a tour of the town and a man rode by on his bike and yelled "Ausländer raus!" at me. I did not know that much German at the time but it was confirmed by my host brother that I had understood correctly. The first thing someone had said to me in my host town outside of my host family was "foreigners get out".

The first couple months in my host town of Papenburg were hard for me. I had made an amazing number of friends but I encountered the word "nigger" very often. One time I came home from school in tears because that word had been yelled and directed at me a little too much. That day I had some sort of epiphany: I was not just given the scholarship to come to Germany so that I could have fun and have the Germans help me learn the language. This was an exchange experience and thus not only were they supposed to open up new things for me but I was supposed to open up things up for them too. I kept that idea in the back of my head and tried to address racism every time it came up.

My friends were the best, they were the best friends I will probably ever have. We spent as much time as we could together and went frequently on little trips. YFU had equipped me well with the Bahnkarte 50, which let me ride any train I wanted in Germany for half of the cost. My best trips were with my friends Jan Mathis and Dennis Schroeder. Schroeder would call me and say Jonathan, I want to go here, do you want to come with me? I would meet him the next morning at the train station with a backpack filled with an extra pair of underwear, a rain coat, toothbrush, and socks. We went to the Oktoberfest in Munich, Hamburg, Kassel, Bremen, and at the end of the year we took a trip on a bus all the way to Paris! The funny part about it was we left Friday night and came back Sunday morning and were only in Paris for about 13 hours. But hey, it was not the destination it was the journey to it that counted.

I took about every trip that I could get my hands on. I went on a school ski trip in the Italian Alps for a week, and was at all of the YFU seminars. They were so cool – I mean we would all sit in the room and speak in German with each other. As an American I am used to hearing English spoken to me when talked to by people from other countries, and since my mother language is English it always gave me a more powerful position in the conversation. But at these seminars and get-togethers we would all sit and talk to each other on the same level because

none of us spoke perfect German. I loved it so much. I mean, I met people from countries that I could not find on the map, with names so difficult to pronounce that we ended up giving each other nicknames. I met people from China, Mongolia, Russia, Colombia, South Africa, Peru, Mexico Australia, Georgia (not the state where peaches come from the actual country), France, Thailand, India, Japan, Latvia, the Ukraine, and even Canada. The amazing thing was that these people who were my age will most definitely become prominent and powerful figures later in their life. I would say about 75% of the students from countries outside of the US were part of the upper class in their home countries and about 25% of them were part of their countries elite. I, on the other hand, was just a boy from Minneapolis who got a scholarship. These friendships between us have given me terrific, life-long connections that will help me pursue my dream of either becoming an Ambassador or working in international business.

I went to the "Als Ausländer in Deutschland" seminar in Dresden, where we spent time bonding with each other and learning and discussing the issue of how foreigners live and are treated in Germany. I remember singing songs outside in the snow with my South American friends with the little Spanish that I knew. I also went to Scheesl, where I spent the week of Easter teaching German youth who were about to be sent to the USA about American customs and what to expect during their exchange year. My last seminar was in Berlin, and it was for the people like me who had received scholarships. We even were allowed to go to the Bundestag and have a conference with the German Green Party.

I could literally talk to you all for an entire day because I loved my foreign exchange so much. I will most definitely study abroad again during college, but I will never be able to have a family, friends and the sense of community abroad that I was given through my YFU experience. I love YFU and I thank you all for giving me the support to follow my dreams of adventure. I already know that after my foreign exchange experience I will not be like most of the other students at my inner-city public school in Minneapolis, who live normal lives. Because I went through YFU, I have been trained to change the world for the better.

My grandmamma also used to say, "Boy, there are good people everywhere. Your job is to find them." Through YFU I did.