

YOUTH FOR UNDERSTANDING STIFTUNG

Speech by Johannes Tschich

XV Enchanted Holiday Evening

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Good evening!

“Opportunity”

That’s a big word, but nevertheless, I want to start with it tonight. I’m sure every one of you has had at least one great opportunity in life and having had one, you all know that taking opportunities is not always easy, but brings us forward. It’s always something that helps us understand things better, especially in our youth, where we have the most questions, be it just “Why are my parents so crazy?”, or deeper matters like “What’s the meaning of life?”

My name is Johannes Tschich. I was born in the last year of the German Democratic Republic and lived in the reunited Germany until I was 16 years old. Then, from 2004 to 2005, I went to Davison, Michigan for one year and with that had the opportunity to leave my little town in the middle of Germany for more than just a two week vacation trip. It was also the opportunity to answer a lot of questions that I couldn’t answer in my own little town. I wanted to seize this opportunity because I was desperate and left alone with a lot of questions, but thought that I wouldn’t be able to seize it, because my parents and I were very concerned about the financial burdens that an exchange year brings with it. But that wasn’t a hurdle I couldn’t jump because I heard there were scholarships for financially weak families that are offered through your great support. I applied for one, and after a few months I became one of a few lucky people who received not only an amount of money they didn’t have to pay back, I mostly received new hope and strength to take this opportunity to experience life and not just watch it like a movie. And tonight I have one more opportunity: The chance to thank you personally for your support of the Youth for Understanding Foundation. And I’m going to take that opportunity: Thank you very much for supporting me and many other students and helping us to understand a lot of things better.

Youth for Understanding totally deserves this name, because understanding is exactly what I was looking for as a youth in an exchange program. I was fifteen years old when I first heard about the possibility to go abroad as an exchange student, when the two brothers of a close friend both spent a year in Kansas City and brought back a lot of pictures and stories I was totally amazed by. I remember a picture in which one of his two brothers was operating a snow blower. I had never seen such a thing before and thought, “Wow, those Americans must be lazy people if they can’t just use a shovel!” One and a half years later I was the one clearing the driveway with a snow blower in

one of Michigan's winters and I was happy I had a snow blower instead of just a shovel. Of course, I didn't know that while looking at the pictures and listening to the brothers' exciting stories, but one day I suddenly found myself standing at the airport ready to leave. And I really mean I was ready to leave. There was nothing that would have kept me at home, and I was more than excited when I experienced my first take-off with a plane.

Then, some hours later, I saw the first gigantic square-shaped American towns from above, with huge cars and streets, just like in the movies. Where I live in Germany, the next McDonalds and Burger King were about 20 miles away. On the way from the airport to my new home I passed more of them than I had seen my entire life. My English was quite bad, but that didn't matter because I was so impressed of this "other side of the world" I could hardly speak anyways. The following first weeks were so impressive to me that I forgot about a lot of what I had left at my other home. Everything and everyone was new, there were so many things to explore that I felt like a child in a toy store. My friends and family in Germany didn't have anything new to explore, they were stuck in the same environment with just one difference: I was gone. Everybody missed me, but I didn't really miss anybody. After a while I understood that I carried a lot of responsibility towards the people I had left behind and that I could not just flee from my everyday life. I would have never realized the importance of facing problems if I hadn't spent such a long time in another family as an exchange student.

I drew a lot of experience out of positive things, for example the unknown intercultural side of an exchange year. My host father, for example, was and still is a fire-fighter. In Germany, or at least in the area where I live, fire-fighters have the reputation of being freaks who have fun playing with water and fire. Not so in America. Here they are real heroes and I was lucky that I was a member of a real American fire-fighter-family. I would have never imagined that I would get infected with this almost fanaticism. There was this one time when we were sitting in a traffic jam coming home from a football game on Friday evening and suddenly heard the radio alarm go off. I can still feel the adrenaline running through my blood when my host father turned on the lights and sirens on his car and drove by the whole traffic jam. Even the police officers regulating the traffic were jumping out of the way when we drove through and finally stopped at the fire station. I can tell you, I was ready to jump on one of those fire trucks yelling "Fire, I'm coming!" After that night I was as stationary as our house's radio itself, sitting next to it and listening to what was going on in the fire-fighting world. My friends in Germany called me a "freak" when I told them about this exciting car ride; they reacted the same way I would have before I was part of a fire-fighter family.

Another thing I experienced was a whole new perspective on history when I took an American History class. As a German, I would never have thought it would be possible for anybody not to know the name "Adolf Hitler", but when we reached the chapter on the two World Wars it was amazing that some students had never heard that name! In fact, it was interesting to get to know another view on this whole topic. Back then I sometimes just wanted to become small like a mouse so that nobody would look at or talk to me. Not only in history class, but as a German in an American environment, whenever the topic of the Holocaust came up I somehow felt guilty about it. But with time I realized it was only enriching for me, as well for others, for example for the history class I was in. I also was asked a lot of funny questions, for instance "Do you guys have ice cream?" or "Do you have warm water in East Germany?" Another exchange student and I wanted to make a shirt with all the answers on the back: "Yes, Germans drive cars and not coaches," "No, not all Germans wear leather pants and eat bratwurst."

All that being the "new one", "the German", but still becoming more and more integrated throughout the year is something I might have imagined before, but could only understand by doing it. Same thing when I came home again: everybody told me I might have a culture shock coming to the US; well, I had one coming home. And it took a long time before I felt good again, because when I came back again I had time to reflect on everything that had happened. There were times when I regretted having gone on an exchange year, because I thought it was irresponsible to leave so many people on either side. But after thinking again, I came to the conclusion that it's never ever a lost year. I heard that many times when I did presentations in some classes in school as a YFU volunteer as an answer to my question of why nobody wanted to go abroad: "Because it's lost time! I don't want to spend another year finishing my career." But that's not a bit true. The experiences I had, the things I hoped to understand and DID understand, they not only gave me tools for the future, but are important for my future career. That's why I'm so convinced when I work for YFU trying to get more young people to have such an experience as well. My exchange year is not over yet, I'm still in it, if you just think about what an experience it is to stand here and talk to you about my exchange year. It's all about taking opportunities and understanding things. Unfortunately in Germany, the economic and political balance between the former divided East and West has still not become stable, which is why many families in the East can't afford to send their children on an exchange year. But as I experienced myself, financial reasons shouldn't be a hurdle we can't jump. That's why I thank you again in the name of every former exchange student for what you have done for us, and I encourage you to keep supporting new generations of potential exchange students through donations to the Youth for Understanding Foundation.

I've got an old vinyl record at home of a songwriter who used to sing in the former GDR. In my favorite song on this record he sings: "You just haven't tried it yet, that's why you don't know." But you have tried it, as I did, and we both know now that it has been and will be so important that it changes lives.

So once again:
Thank you!