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In the wake of a very contentious 2016 election cycle, and with a country that is divided politically and ideologically, there is a climate in which people are fearful of the future and of each other. Barrett Honors College has embarked on an effort to “heal” our community through dialogue around issues of diversity and inclusion, and by encouraging students to participate in global engagement opportunities and grow into global citizens who are aware and interested in the world around them.



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Steven Reed in front of the Reichstag building at the Tiergarten in Berlin, Germany.

Steven Reed, an honors biology and mathematics student and Flinn scholar graduating in Spring 2018, sought an opportunity to do just that. Imagine traveling to a new country for an entire semester where you didn't know anyone, and your mission was to engage with as many local people as possible, despite expected and unexpected cultural barriers. This was the independent study project Reed successfully completed in Berlin, Germany during the Fall 2016 semester.

Reed, who had been following the Syrian refugee crisis through the news over the past year a half, was interested in examining differences in anti-refugee sentiment across countries. Germany, he found through prior research, is one of the most pro-refugee countries, and would be an ideal location to examine what factors influence people's feelings towards refugees.

“Germany – and Berlin in particular – came up as a place that defied the norms of other countries that were pushing away refugees or restricting the number of refugees they would let in,” Reed said. “Berlin is the center of Germany's refugee and immigrant programs; all refugees enter Germany through Berlin.”

Getting to Berlin was where Barrett came in, and specifically one honors faculty member, Dr. Don Fette. Reed reached out to Fette, his honors English professor from back in 2013, and asked about collaborating on an independent study for honors credit. It turns out Fette was the perfect fit for directing this project, thanks to his own academic background with Germany.

“I assisted Steven (in conjunction with the ASU Study Abroad office) on aspects of planning his trip and finding contacts in Berlin and Germany,” Fette said. “I worked with him on several aspects of the project: narrowing the overall focus of the project; setting a research agenda to provide historical, cultural and, to some extent, a theoretical backing for the project; developing and refining a list of interview questions; setting the number of respondents and thinking about demographic factors to include.”

Once on his own in Berlin, Reed subleased an apartment and got to work. Still enrolled in classes through ASU Online, Reed's time abroad was a mix of schoolwork, travel and engaging with Germans and recent migrants. He was even able to volunteer at a refugee center in Berlin, which had a huge impact on his understanding of the refugee crisis.

"While it was depressing to see how little the refugees had, I thought it was very inspiring to see how they don't let their current conditions get them down," Reed said. "The kids are still upbeat, they're very friendly, most of them seem relatively happy. I'd never thought of what it'd be like to live in their shoes."

Arranging interviews with locals proved to be an interesting challenge, despite leads he was given prior to travel.

"If you ask people that you're not close with to talk, you get turned down a lot," Reed said. "I ended up with a fairly small sample size, but I worked pretty in-depth with the information I got."

His findings through thorough interviews suggested that religion was not a major factor affecting people's views on refugees – despite what his literature review indicated.

"I was originally thinking that Germany's difference in religious composition would have an effect on being more open to people from other religions," Reed said. "Reality didn't follow a religious line, and it was never a basis for an argument against refugees."

Instead, conservatism and generational divides created fear among the local population.

"There seems to be a bit of a generational divide between opinions on refugees, particularly Syrian refugees, because these are highly argued political issues," Reed explained. "People who tend to think more conservatively are more against helping refugees, claiming their safety is at risk. Those paranoid concerns about helping people seem consistent with responses I've seen in the U.S."

Reed, who plans to complete his honors thesis in a topic related to biology, sets his ambitions beyond his majors, due to the resources available to him as a Barrett student and Flinn scholar.

"Thanks to my scholarship, I haven't had to work to pay for my food and bills, which allows me to get involved with things like research and take more classes," Reed said. "As a part of Barrett, there's a wealth of opportunities to pursue. My independent project was relevant to my interests, so I found a professor and made it happen."

Fette was impressed by Reed's drive to make it happen, too.

"Steven's project was so timely and it addressed an issue that truly is a global concern," Fette said. "I'm honored to have worked with a student who took the initiative to engage this issue from a perspective diverse from the typical one we have as Americans. Going to Berlin to interview Berliners in order to assess attitudes and positions potentially different from our own is a step toward a kind of inclusiveness and helps develop Steven's own sense of 'global citizenship,' a goal Barrett has set for itself."

Reed's nontraditional route for studying abroad was especially rewarding for him as a solo traveler.

"I didn't want to just be part of a typical American bubble where you eat sleep with just American

students,” Reed said. “I feel much more confident in my abilities as a traveler after going through this experience.”

To students who are likewise interested in taking their interests outside of a traditional study abroad experience, Fette offers straightforward advice.

“Take advantage of the great opportunity you have to participate in an independent study abroad; choose a location and project that you are truly passionate about and interested in; plan carefully in order to avoid unnecessary problems; and have fun along with the academic and research sides of the trip.”

As for Reed, he adds a note to any travelers who may end up in Berlin someday: “Try a doner kabab there. It’s delicious.”

Story reported and written by Barrett Honors College student Sapna Daryanani

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