

“You really are immersed in another life world”

Andrew Breidenbach has defining social experiences during his internship program



Bild: Breidenbach talking with Manfred Rommel, a resident of the Wohnheim Gartenstraße in Diakonie Stetten, Region Kernen.

Abstract:

My name is Andrew Breidenbach and I spent a week at a residential center for severely handicapped people as a part of my internship at the *mehrwert* agency. I had a lot of eye-opening experiences there and learned a lot about myself. Half my internship has already gone by now, but I can say I've enjoyed everything so far and I've really been given a chance to develop personally and professionally. I look forward to the remaining weeks here with *mehrwert*.

I'm currently here as an intern through the AmCham Internship Program. As a sociology major, I was paired up with the Stuttgart agency *mehrwert*. The agency develops sustainable social learning projects for companies and schools, in which participants spend a week in a local welfare facility, such as at a nursing home or a soup kitchen. The agency works with people who live on the fringes of society. The goal of these projects is the enhancement and strengthening of personal and social competence through holistic, interactive learning on site in "unfamiliar life situations". Through such vivid and compelling experiences, the participants learn to see their life from another perspective. The resulting empathy and understanding for the reality of the disadvantaged individual promotes many positive traits in the social attitude of a person.

“Gradually, I got over any fear of contact”

This last week, I spent Monday through Friday at a residential nursing center for handicapped and mentally ill people of all ages. This was a mandatory part of my internship. The agency I work for develops projects for companies and schools, in which participants spend a week in such a welfare facility. Other examples include working with homeless, poor or unemployed people. The goal of these projects is to increase social and emotional competence through holistic, interactive learning in “foreign life situations”. Through such a vivid and engaging experience, the participants learn to see life from another perspective and the resulting empathy and full acknowledgement of another person’s disadvantaged life ends up promoting many positive traits for a person’s social attitude.

I can honestly say that the experience doesn’t disappoint. There is a small introductory workshop which is conducted right before assignment into the welfare facility, in which fears and goals are discussed and strategies are developed. But nothing can actually prepare you for when you finally get there. The sights, the smells, the sounds...You really are immersed in another life world, and for me, it was a world I had had no experience in. The residents in my nursing home were all severely handicapped. Most of them could not even do the tiniest things for themselves- eating, drinking, showering, going to the bathroom, brushing their teeth. It was a highly scheduled and rationalized world they lived in, one which was organized around the tasks of everyday living and bodily functions.

Gradually, I got over any fear of contact I might have had and allowed myself to simply be open to doing and trying new things. The first day, I took several residents on a little walk over the grounds. Then, I took one of the residents to go shopping for pretzels. By the end, I was helping with feeding at meal time and was going out of my way to try to stimulate them and interact with them during free time.

“I realized the potential I had to make some small impact”

I found myself particularly drawn to an older woman named Irmgard. She seemed the most complex out of any of the residents and also required much care and attention. Her communication abilities were reduced to grunting and occasionally lunging forward violently in her wheelchair. I could feel somehow how conflicted and ravaged this woman’s brain was. Often I would speak with her, sometimes even in English, just so that she might feel that she was having a normal conversation. I also volunteered at mealtime to feed her. One of those times, as I was sitting next to her, cutting up her food into small, manageable bites and trying to get her to open her mouth wide enough, I noticed her eyes welling up with tears, which dribbled down her cheeks. And I looked at her, with her bib around her neck and food smudged on her chin, spilled from her mouth, just helpless, being fed like a baby. And I just couldn’t help but feel an overwhelming sense of pity for this poor woman.

From that point on, I developed a renewed sense of confidence, self-esteem and initiative during my time there. I came to see myself from their point of view, and realized the potential I had to make some small impact in their lives, whether it was making them laugh for that day or helping them up a hill on the way back from shopping. I also learned a lot



from the staff there and how they went about with residents. Respect always seemed to play a key role in interactions between staff and residents. Overall, I walked away from that week feeling humbled and accomplished. It was a good feeling.

“To make new friends, you have to be open to new interactions”

Outside of the office I've also learned something: to find new friends, you have to be open and ready for new and different situations. You can't make friends sitting at home on the couch. It took a while before I had faith once again in my own German abilities, but now after 5 weeks of everyday use, it's in good shape. German friends are the best way to use German, to practice it and to improve it. It's now also a perfect time to be in Germany, as well: the World Cup. The World Championship unites this nation like perhaps no other event can. It's really been surprising to see how much enthusiasm and support people have been showing for their country, from hanging a flag out of a window to parading up and down the street with a flag as a cape and vuvuzela in hand.

In my first few weeks at *mehrwert*, I've learned a lot, to say the least. Every day I'm picking up new words and phrases and trying to add them to my vocabulary in my speech. But furthermore, I'm also learning how to conduct oneself properly in an office environment and how to be more independent and self-sufficient. I'm learning life lessons here. The first half of the internship is already over but I can tell that this will be one of the best summers of my life. I'm extremely lucky and happy to have gotten such a chance to participate in such a well-organized program. I don't take such a massive opportunity for granted at all. All the people I've met here have been on the whole relaxed, down-to-earth, good people, and I want to thank them all for that. I appreciate a lot what everyone's done for me here and I eagerly look forward to the rest of the summer.

Andrew Breidenbach

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