

Dear Rotarians,

you invited me to speak about what the year on the Georgia Rotary Student Program has meant to me. This is a great honour and I am grateful to be here and to have an opportunity to explain how deep an impact this Georgia year has had on my life.

And yet: How can I explain? The year on the GA Rotary Student Program has become “my Georgia experience” which comprises a host of experiences I had 25 years ago. Looking back over all those years my first, spontaneous answer is that the year in Georgia has been the most formative year of my life. I feel it, I know it without having to think long.

However, being the person I am, I did not want to leave it at that. I wanted to find a more accurate answer, why this year plays such a prominent role in my life. Therefore, I spent weeks searching my memory, looking through my Georgia diary and photos and talking to other former Rotary students I am still friends with. In a way working on this speech became – very much like the year itself – a challenge which turned out to be a rewarding experience.

In order to appreciate what the Georgia year did for me, how I went into this experience and how I came out of it, let me give you a little impression of who I was before I came to Georgia.

I grew up in a family with its own American experience dating back to the 1930s. My grandfather, who was an English teacher, left Germany in 1934 to take a teaching position at the State Teachers' College in Montclair, New Jersey. My father and his sisters attended American schools, became fluent in English, and enjoyed extracurricular activities unheard of in Germany at that time. In 1936 my grandfather took his family back to Germany because he was nervous about his status as a civil servant in Germany. I remember my father telling me again and again how shocked he as an 18-year-old was to realize that his home country had turned into a dictatorship in the years of the family's absence. I grew up with stories about the freedom of life in America, the atmosphere of encouragement, the great nature and vastness of the land, the easy-going social interaction, jazz music, skyscrapers and other achievements.

And yet, despite my family's positive attitude towards the United States I did not remain untouched by other influences. In the year 1979, I had just finished German high school with honours, I considered myself well-read in European literature, interested in the arts, worried about nuclear fallout, the arms race between the Soviet Union and the NATO, and the problems of the so-called Third World. In a way I liked to consider myself an intellectual which at that time meant being sceptical about the U.S., an easy position to take because the media were full of articles about the US crime rate and drug problems, its people's rootlessness and grotesque consumerism and so on.

Thus having divergent pictures of the United States in my mind, pictures that either way made this country seem a special place, I was curious and wanted to find out for myself what America was really like. This was one reason for applying for the scholarship.

Another one was that I was a young woman trying to find out what I should do with my life, trying to become more independent of my parents, trying to get away from a framework of traditions, rules and expectations that had so far conditioned my upbringing. I simply wanted to take a year off.

In August 1979 I arrived in Georgia and had my first important experiences of the American way of life. Georgia was a very nice surprise because it was so different from stereotypes about the South that I had been confronted with in Europe. I had an immediate impression of visible history, of a strong regional pride similar to the one of a Rhinelander or a Bavarian in Germany and of people's sense of belonging. The delicious Southern cooking told its own story of heritage and refinement.

I met many Georgians who hosted me generously. I noticed how important family ties were to everybody, how well friendships were cultivated, how traditions were kept up in religion and in volunteer work to the community. I had not expected such virtues and it helped me warm to the country quickly.

I enrolled at Wesleyan College, for the first time without the direct guidance from my parents, young and open to all kinds of impressions. My diary is full of the sense of freedom associated with this student life. Of course, any freshman in Germany feels this freedom, but this was different. Apart from the obligation to Rotary to study

seriously and get good grades, there were no expectations, no duties, no decisions to make. Staying for a limited period of time, I could take the college year as a vast experiment, a chance to try out different subjects. This helped me find out what I really like, what I am really good at, and what I should do with my life.

This was wonderfully supported by two notable features of the American university system. Firstly, that American educational institutions with their focus on living together on campus allow the whole person to grow and, secondly, their overall spirit of encouragement. European universities tend to be big and anonymous buildings where you attend classes and that's about all. At Wesleyan College, in contrast, I could choose between creative writing, a photography competition, a drama group, lots of sports, a debating team and so on. Whatever I did, I always felt there was this stress on talent, this positive attitude that there is something special in each individual. Because I was encouraged to try things out, I developed a better sense of identity and strength, and I became more optimistic and more open to new ideas.

I learnt a lot at college. And I learnt about America. I mentioned before that I carried this somehow inconsistent picture of the United States in my mind. There are so many things everybody admires about America, but at the same time there are aspects – at least the way they are publicised – which sometimes irritate people in other countries. Because we Europeans live in countries closely associated with the United States and share common values, we tend to believe we know how to interpret America. What I had to realise, though, was that things looked different from the inside. That, of course, is true of any country. But in the case of the United States the discrepancy between reality and the public image of the country as presented by the media is especially striking. I truly think that one has to live in America for a while to get a real feeling for this country. Take, for example, its rural character. You can read about rural America, but as somebody coming from a densely populated country like Germany you cannot comprehend how this vastness forms social attitudes unless you have moved about in this vast land yourself. And by absorbing impressions like those this country has become part of me.

This inside and every day knowledge of America depends to a large measure on “talking to the natives”. If I had registered at an American college on my own I could have talked to my fellow students, but I think the Georgia Rotary Student Program

gave me a far better opportunity: in addition to my fellow students I had many Rotarian families to turn to with my questions. They were people of different ages and different professions, which was wonderful to get different views of the country. I still feel deep gratitude when I think back to how I buttonholed them all with my questions, how patiently they discussed comparisons between Germany and Georgia with me, how much interest everybody took in helping me sort out my impressions and also discussing critical issues.

Looking back now I think that it has not always been an easy job for the hosts to take such personal care of young people who might not have acknowledged the value of this gift until later in life. I am in the position to appreciate the importance of these personal relationships because I went abroad a second time, and though I enjoyed that year I did not develop emotional ties the way I did in Georgia. I am positive that this applies to all former Rotary students, even if they should not have managed to stay in contact with their host families.

Now let me enlarge on the aspect I mentioned in the beginning of this speech when I said my year was a formative experience. I think I was formed not only by the American way of life, but also by the experience of being a stranger. Let me explain the latter point. Trying to become familiar with Georgia meant continually trying to understand differences between me and my host country. Thus I started to reflect on what it means to be a stranger. Living in a foreign society and culture is hard work indeed. You want to adapt but first you have to understand how, and especially in the beginning, this can be frustrating. It's like a game you have to play without knowing the rules. Suddenly you realise that many things you do supposedly naturally are rooted in one's cultural heritage.

My Georgia year showed me that our lives are ruled by many tacit patterns of behaviour which play a role even in everyday situations like eating out in a restaurant and cannot necessarily be applied to another society. I started reflecting on my "Germanness", or to put it precisely, I became aware of my "Germanness" for the first time.

In the first weeks in Georgia I experienced some remarkable misunderstandings that taught me that I had to tell people about myself in order to help them understand my

behaviour. This showed me that I could no longer use my own cultural coordinate system and had to be more careful when it came to evaluating situations or people. Before I came to Georgia I tended to be a little opinionated. Now I gradually became more humble.

I learnt that two incompatible perspectives can be plausible each within its context, so that one should not jump to conclusions before knowing the context. I learnt that before I criticise certain things I should be aware of where my own blind spot was. I have also become very cautious about judging people of a different background. Maybe this does not seem like much of an insight to you as living in a nation based on immigration, but for someone coming from a hitherto socially more homogenous country this was quite a challenge.

At the same time I realized I had to find a way to communicate on the basis of what people from different cultures have in common. By understanding the role of cultural codes I was able to learn some of the rules of the American way of life, and at the same time I learned that rules are not as important if one can find a bridge in the things that all people have in common, regardless of the country they come from. Since the Georgia year I have the deep conviction that we reach this common ground if we treat each other with respect and tact.

Let me leave it at that. I could go on for hours highlighting remarkable experiences and valuable insights I gained from my immersion in Georgian life but I think I have pointed out the most important dynamics of that year.

When I came back to Germany I decided I wanted to keep in touch with this Georgia experience by enrolling for American Studies. Later, I strove to repeat the experience of a year abroad on the European scale by studying in Ireland. After completing my PhD, I started a career as a librarian. In my husband Frank, who holds an M.A. in English literature and History and also spent a university year abroad, I have found a companion who shares many of my interests, for which I am very grateful. Since our two boys are likewise interested in travelling and foreign languages, I hope they will eventually perpetuate the family tradition of living in a foreign country for a while.

In the past few years I have put my energy into raising my children and developing professional know-how as a specialist for library buildings, so I was not involved in any impressive community work developing international understanding. But I attempt to spread the message in everyday life. I tend to adopt any Americans coming my way at home. With the Ford Motor Company in Cologne there are quite a few Americans stationed in my hometown, and I always try to be a good host to whoever I meet. In my job I take extra care in assisting the many foreign students coming to Bonn University. Most importantly, however, I try to mediate in discussions about the United States, try to work against prejudices, try to make other people see America from the inside. And I strive to keep up a network of friends from different countries around the world, most of whom I met on the Georgia Rotary Student Program.

Let me mention some of these Rotary alumni who you might remember. I talked to them about this conference and my speech:

1. Anne Hødnebø (sponsored by R.C. Dublin) has become a senior neurologist in her home country Norway and often travels to medical congresses in the United States.
2. Gunn Reinertsen (sponsored by R. C. Griffin) took a degree in American Studies, started as a copy editor for the Norwegian edition of Reader's Digest and now works as editor-in-chief of an important Norwegian publisher.
3. Uwe Korber (sponsored by R. C. Brookwood and North DeKalb) went to law school, on account of his Georgia experience got a good position with the German government, during the reunification process served as one of the spokesmen of the German ambassador at the U.N. headquarters in New York City.
4. Dorte Krogsgaard (sponsored by R. C. Marietta, Brookwood and North DeKalb) studied journalism and has become a well-known TV journalist in her home country Denmark.
5. Jun Kigoshi (sponsored by R. C. Gwinnet County) has worked at the Japanese ministry of finance and presently holds a position with a Japanese bank in London.

6. Fabienne Kissian (sponsored by R. C. Conyers and South DeKalb) went into translation studies and works as an interpreter at the European Union headquarters in Brussels.
7. Reidun Heiene (sponsored by R. C. North Lake and Stone Mountain) has become a veterinarian and works with the U. N. cattle program in Ethiopia.
8. My sister Annette (sponsored by R. C. Carrollton, Newnan and Bremen) majored in American Studies, became a high-school teacher and for several summers worked as a volunteer ranger in American National Parks.

They all asked me to express their lasting gratitude on their behalf. They are proud to be alumni of the Georgia Rotary scholarship and I think you can be proud of them too.

The Georgia Rotary Student Program was established in 1946, just a year after the end of World War II. Never before had a war reached such a level of destruction including genocide triggered by ideologies and ethnic stereotypes. After this all-time low hope could only be found in an effort to bridge the gap between different countries, customs and religions, and I think the Georgia Rotary Student Program has had an impressive share in the development of international understanding.

Nearly 60 years later, however, we have pervasive media, more tourist experience, and a global economy. You may feel that the inhabitants of the "global village" no longer need scholarship programs like this because they are mobile and have more access to information. However, tourists do not necessarily learn about the countries they visit and knowledge as such has rarely done away with prejudices or stopped wars. I believe that international understanding can only grow from living together, at least for a while, from friendship across borders. Treaties between states alone do not generate peace, it is the interaction of the citizens themselves, which gives life to political alliances. Thus, the Georgia Rotary Students Program is still as modern as it was more than fifty years ago. Sponsoring young people remains the only sensible measure to reach international understanding. I am proud and grateful I was one of the students this program was created for. Thank you very much.