

German-US-American Youth Exchanges

USA Special 2022



Expertise

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Foreword

USA Special 2022

The United States of America is an exceptional country for its size alone, with its population of just under 330 million and a land area 27 times larger than Germany. Approx. 87 million young people aged between 10 and 29 are growing up in this land of superlatives, a country of progress and diversity.

Germany and the United States of America have been bound by a close friendship for many decades. Common roots, the same democratic values and a shared (youth) culture form an invisible bond across the Atlantic. Virtually no other country appears in our news, on our smartphones, in our living or kids' rooms as consistently as the US. It comes as no surprise, then, that the country continues to be one of the most popular exchange destinations for school children and students.

Young people in Germany are fascinated by the culture of the United States. Social media creates a new kind of closeness and offers insights into the lives and interests of young US-Americans, unfiltered and in real time. The young generations' interest in each other has long since transcended music, movies and the latest TikTok challenges. Young people also share their concerns and question values, societal norms and social constructs online. Within seconds, hashtags and entire social movements can spill over to Germany from the US (#metoo, #blm are just two examples). All the more reason to draw on this reciprocal interest and give young people the opportunity to meet in person, learn from each other and make plans together in the context of international projects.

Compared with school or academic exchanges, international youth work exchanges with the US are rarer. That said, projects that venture across the Atlantic do exist. These are exchanges that have developed out of long-standing friendships, a shared passion for music, or a tireless commitment to participation and civic education. They are projects that go beyond the Statue of Liberty and fast food to delve deeply into all aspects of US-American life, and help participants explore a country that is so similar to Germany and yet so different.

The USA Special authors and interview partners prove that an exchange with the US is worthwhile for all participants, especially young people, regardless of where they come from, what skills they have or what they are interested in. They demonstrate the great diversity of German-US-American youth exchanges, with their different formats and subjects, which connect with the realities of young people on both sides of the Atlantic.

We hope this USA Special will be an inspiring read. Be bold and organize your own transatlantic exchange activities to give young people from Germany and the US the opportunity to get to know each other and fill the German-US-American friendship with life. After all, there is so much to discover in a country whose 50 federal states between Hollywood and the White House could not be more diverse.

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**Elena Neu, Natali Petala-Weber
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German-US-American Youth Exchanges

The Exchanges Team of the U.S. Embassy
Berlin, Germany

“International educational exchange is the most significant current project designed to continue the process of humanizing mankind to the point, we would hope, that men can learn to live in peace – eventually even to cooperate in constructive activities rather than compete in a mindless contest of mutual destruction.” ¹



Senator William J. Fulbright's words on the occasion of the 30th anniversary of his legendary exchange program still hold true today. A mutual understanding of cultures is at the heart of any successful exchange program, and personal relationships are its backbone. Exchanges create lasting links between countries, and exchanges between Germany and the United States, which are among the most extensive and diverse, have played a key role in the history of transatlantic relations.

Berlin, 1962: American exchange students at Checkpoint Charlie.

How it came about

Modern day German-US-American exchange programs developed in the aftermath of two devastating world wars and were integral to the foundation of lasting peace. Shortly after World War I, US-American organizations introduced short-term programs to encourage young US-Americans to travel abroad and visit Germany. These programs continued to run during World War II. The greatest challenge, however, was finding reliable forms of transport between the US and Europe. Paradoxically, some participants wanting to benefit from the peace-keeping potential of these exchange programs crossed the Atlantic on ships used to transport troops.

In his third inaugural address in 1941, President Franklin D. Roosevelt stressed the importance of cross-cultural understanding. He described

a future in which personal diplomacy would be central and the role of individual men and women in maintaining security and peace would be a hallmark of post-war US-American foreign policy: "A Nation, like a person, has a mind – a mind that must be kept informed and alert, that must know itself, that understands the hopes and the needs of its neighbors [...]."

It is not surprising that the United States saw the strategic importance of mutual understanding as an important component of an ideal foreign policy for the post-war world. Just one month after the end of the war, the *Surplus Property Act* of 1944 was amended at the initiative of Senator Fulbright, allowing proceeds from the sale of surplus war property to be used to promote international goodwill through student exchanges. In 1945, he laid the foundation for the exchange program that bears his name: the *Fulbright Program*. In





President Eisenhower welcomes 760 exchange students at the White House.

2022, the [German-American Fulbright Program](#), set up in 1952, celebrated its 70th anniversary. Some 40,000 Germans and US-Americans have so far participated in the program over its lifetime.

In 1956, President Dwight D. Eisenhower established the youth exchange program *People-to-People*. The final legal basis for a post-war academic exchange program was created in 1961 through the *Mutual Educational and Cultural Exchange Act*. Also known as the *Fulbright-Hays Act of 1961*, co-initiated by Congressman Wayne Hays of Ohio, the act extended the program's range to include other countries. It also led to the establishment of the U.S. Department of State's *Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs* (ECA), which today carries out programs with 160 countries around the world and in which over one million Germans and US-Americans have participated so far.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the younger generation of Germans developed an increasingly skeptical attitude towards the United States. The fact that subsequent generations no longer recognized the same positive historical and cultural references with regard to transatlantic relations provided the impetus for the introduction of the [Congress-Bundestag Youth Exchange](#). US Senators John Heinz and Dick Lugar proposed setting up a German-US-American youth exchange program under the

auspices of the U.S. Congress and the German Bundestag. Senator Lugar explained the reasons in the Senate as follows: "The German-American relationship is unique. It is founded on the rubble of the Second World War, on the experience of occupation and reconstruction, on the reintegration of West Germany into Western Europe [...]"²

The *Congress-Bundestag Youth Exchange* program is now almost 40 years old. The one-year scholarship enables 350 US-American and 360 German high school students, vocational school graduates and young professionals to spend time in each other's country. Some 28,000 German and US-American scholars have so far participated in the program.

The U.S. Department of State and the Federal German Foreign Office also co-fund the [German-American Partnership Program \(GAPP\)](#), which celebrates its 50th anniversary in 2022. This program funds school partnerships and short-term group trips for students from all types of schools in both countries. Almost 9,000 young people participate annually. Around 350,000 young adults have so far travelled with the program.

Alongside the programs presented here, student exchanges as well as au pair and camp programs are also offered by numerous private providers and organizations.

What's happening today?

Exchange programs play an important role in terms of foreign and security policy, yet they also have a social dimension since they promote integration, equal opportunities, diversity, and civic responsibility. Exchange programs are open to all school children and students from Germany and the United States. However, due to different access and funding opportunities as well as varying levels of awareness about the programs, not everyone participates.

Although the three programs mentioned above are scholarship programs, certain demographic groups of young people are generally poorly represented in

¹ From a speech on the occasion of the 30th anniversary of the Fulbright Program in 1976.

² Congressional Record - Senate, Washington, Thursday, September 22, 1983, p. 25264

exchange programs. The reasons for this are manifold. Including these important groups remains a key challenge, and one that must be tackled in line with the core objectives of exchange programs.

To correct this imbalance, some programs have been designed specifically to address to these poorly represented groups. For instance, the *Benjamin A. Gilman International Scholarship Program*, which is named after the former Congressman, offers US-American students with limited financial resources scholarships to study or complete internships abroad.

In this spirit, in the 1990s the U.S. Embassy in Germany began to work with German partners to offer successful new initiatives geared specifically towards poorly represented German target groups. One example is the community service-based *USA For You* for students aiming to achieve a first or middle school diploma.

With the suspension of the majority of exchange programs as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic since 2020, there has been an increase in the use of digital formats. While experience has shown that they are not an equal substitution for in-person exchanges, they have led to the broader participation of young people and may therefore be a gateway towards participation in an in-person exchange.

More important than ever before

Exchange programs will continue to be an important driver of peace, civic engagement and equal opportunities. They have demonstrated their diplomatic value not only in transatlantic relations, but also globally. An exchange is a formative experience that helps eliminate prejudices about different nationalities and cultures and fosters valuable life-long connections. It has the potential to show young people how they can work together to tackle climate change, sustainable economics and business practices, extremism, and other challenges. In a *speech on cultural diplomacy*, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said: “Cultural exchanges are a powerful



Washington, D.C., 1961: The float in celebration of the People-to-People program inauguration speech passes president John F. Kennedy.

way for people to connect across borders. [...] Exchanges can get people to see each other’s humanity, build a sense of common purpose, change the minds of those who misunderstand us, and tell the American story in a way that no policy or speech ever could.”

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If you know anyone who is ready for a life-changing experience, this is where the journey starts: [Education & Exchanges](#)

Civic Education as a Centerpiece of Transatlantic Exchange

Katja Greeson

In launching the *Transatlantic Exchange of Civic Educators* (TECE) pilot project in early 2021, the *Arbeitskreis deutscher Bildungsstätten* (Association of German Educational Organizations, AdB) waded into little-explored territory. Despite a US-German connection in the realm of “politische Bildung” and youth work in post-WWII reeducation efforts, the theory, practice and structures have since grown separately, against the backdrop of two varied cultural and socioeconomic landscapes.

With our project, we have convened 22 TECE Fellows (mid-career professionals in the field of non-formal youth civic learning in the US and Germany) for online and in-person exchange and engaged numerous individuals and organizations in both countries. Our aim is to explore whether the challenges and systems of civic learning in both countries are compatible for fruitful exchange and what formats and topics are best suited for a US-German transfer of knowledge and experience. In so doing, our specific goals were to:

- » **Better understand current societal trends and the state of civic learning – structures, topics, unique features - in the USA and Germany**
- » **Build a pool of transatlantic multipliers and concrete partnerships for future projects**
- » **Use peer-learning to share best-practice models to spark innovation and a transfer of learning to sending organizations**

After nearly a year conducting the project, we are able to offer several insights into the value offered by US-German exchange in the fields of civic learning and youth work, as well as the specific challenges it presents.

Prime time for civic learning

Civic education in the U.S. is experiencing what has been dubbed a “Sputnik moment”. New state and federal legislation and funding streams have sprung up as policy-makers and the public realize the importance of civic learning for a healthy democracy. With increased attention, has come increased scrutiny. In a society encumbered by stark political polarization, civic education has not avoided being ensnared in partisan political debates, related to how to teach about race and difficult histories, the role of neutrality in education, and what methods are acceptable ways of engaging young people in active citizenship. Similar threats face youth workers and civic educators in Germany. As civic learning faces the spotlight in both countries, the opportunity to learn across contexts is all the more important.



Compatibility of structures

In comparison to the German field of non-formal civic education, the US field could be considered a decentralized “Wild Wild West”. With no national youth policy, the policy and practice is vastly different across regional, state and local levels. Compared to the robust public funding and publicly-funded institutions in Germany, funding in the U.S. more typically relies on private foundations and individual donors. Whereas in Germany we see myriad layers of networks organizing the field, efforts to build a networked professional field in the U.S. are still in progress.

Another key difference that has arisen often in the scope of the TECE project, is the focus on formal education as a venue for civic learning in the US, with far less focus on non-formal learning settings. “Civic education” is largely deemed a responsibility of schools, a legacy of the U.S.’ Founding Fathers ideas about public education. Certainly, the principles of non-formal education play out in other forms, such as “popular education” and even within formal education contexts, but the term non-formal is not used and the clear separation of formal, non-formal, and informal sectors is less evident, with many civic-focused NGOs working in partnership with formal education. Civic learning opportunities that occur outside of formal education settings often take on more action-oriented forms, such as “youth organizing”, “youth participatory action research”, and “service learning”.

These structural differences in the field itself give us space for inspiration and re-imagining, but they also create complications in developing exchange experiences. With TECE, we set out to provide an opportunity specifically for non-formal civic educators – a group with limited access to transatlantic exchange opportunities compared with formal teachers. In the German context, we had a clear idea of who this group would encompass and how to communicate that in the call for applicants. Identifying appropriate counterparts and communicating that

on the US side was less clear. By virtue of including “civic educators” in the project title, we unintentionally gave the impression the project was intended for teachers. Adding “non-formal” or “out-of-school” to the description did little to clarify, so we ultimately amended to a general description of “professionals working toward the civic development of young people (ages 14-29)”. Although this may seem a small hiccup in our recruitment process or an

obscure detail, it points to the relevance of identifying compatible partners amid disparate structures.

Ultimately, our selected group of US-American Fellows includes a diversity of professionals working at universities as professors and in community engagement offices, national NGOs that train teachers and produce resources, and locally-focused non-profit organizations working on communi-

ty organizing and education. Despite the different work settings, formats, topics, and even target groups, there is clear common ground. Working across these structural contexts can actually benefit us by looking beyond our bubbles, but understanding these differences is a precondition.

Finding a common language

In any multi-lingual international exchange, communication is a central factor. All the more so when the lingua franca is one of the party’s mother tongue, producing a power imbalance. Finding a common language, however, goes beyond this purely dialect-oriented interpretation.

Unlike in the European arena of International Youth Work, a common, transatlantic working language around who we are as professionals and the work we do in the youth work and civic learning field has yet to be developed. To engage in topics at a deep level requires that participants clarify and grapple with and, when necessary, develop new vocabulary. Simply learning vocabulary and definitions is not enough to transcend the thought patterns and preconceptions that exist based on what our



Simply learning vocabulary and definitions is not enough to transcend the thought patterns and preconceptions that exist based on what our language allows us to communicate.

language allows us to communicate. In addition, it requires opening up dedicated space for dialogical exchange and experiential processes.

Despite having dedicated time in online sessions with TECE Fellows to an exploration of terminology, it was evident how certain concepts became clearer during our in-person meeting.

One could see, for example, how the concept of non-formal education (NFE) became more familiar for US-based participants, who slowly were able to understand and ultimately challenge certain long-held beliefs and raise questions that opened important conversations for the whole group about the value and practice of NFE. Moreover, it was clear how important a trusting and patient environment is in regard to more sensitive or emotionally-charged topics such as identity, where people enter the conversation with different knowledge backgrounds and varying comfort with language around the issue.

An exchange format should make intentional efforts to center language as a way to help us understand how language constrains our understanding and helps us expand our way of thinking, or it risks leading to unclear conversations and confusion over how to work across contexts.

Logistical challenges

At a practical level, there are objective hurdles to overcome in implementing US-German exchange: e.g, the distance and expense of travel, time zones, and lack of existing, robust institutional support and funding opportunities. Given these challenges, we need to think about transatlantic international exchange in a new way. Since March 2020, the field of international youth work has had to scout out new models and approaches to its work. Perhaps, rather than trying to make our traditional conception of international youth work fit into the US-German context, we can use this opportunity as a way of re-thinking international youth work formats to identify and test more sustainable, cost-effective, and increasingly digitally-connected approaches in the transatlantic arena.

Looking ahead

Historically, and still today, a “negative” transatlantic knowledge transfer has taken place, where white supremacist and right-extremist ideas have been traded, both openly and discretely. As one TECE Fellow remarked during a morning reflection round, we desperately need a counteracting knowledge transfer in the field of civic learning and youth work to help combat these transatlantic threats. There is much to learn, from varied topical focuses and structures, different societal self-conceptions, ideas about the role of the state and images of the “good citizen”, that has reaffirmed my belief in the deep need for continued dialogue. US-German exchange in the field of youth civic learning provides us that opportunity.

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Ambassadors in Sneakers –

A Young Leaders' Transatlantic Summer Academy on Human Rights

Anna Steinbrich and Felix Weinmann

Ambassadors in Sneakers is a four-week educational program for 12 youth councilors (aged between 16 and 20) from Germany and the US. The program focuses on human rights, and against this background participants learn about the political structures of both countries and transatlantic relations. While traveling together in Germany and the US, the young participants find out about places and institutions that are of significance to the development and defense of human rights, and they compare different forms of youth participation.

During the program, participants meet activists, contemporary witnesses, media representatives, and politicians to learn from and with each other and to bring their experiences and findings back to their own communities. During visits to Georgia and Alabama, for example, participants in the first two exchanges in 2017 and 2018 took a close look at the American civil rights movement. In 2019, the Ambassadors in sneakers spent a week in Leipzig and Berlin, respectively, visiting Ann Arbor, Michigan, and Chicago, Illinois shortly after. Anna Steinbrich took part as the representative of the Vaihingen/Enz Youth Council. This is what she had to say about her experiences:

Gaining a new perspective of our own history

In Leipzig, the cultural exchange began even before Team USA had arrived. Team Germany consisted of four participants from Saxony and eight from Baden-Württemberg, some of whom, including myself, had never been to eastern Germany before. Issues like population decline made

me realize that a piece of the Wall is somehow still standing. And the way we stereotype “the East” brought home to me that the Wall still exists in some ways – above all in our minds. So initially, there were one or two prejudices. But essentially, the city isn't that different – it's just been shaped by its unique and sometimes tragic history.

The highlight of my visit to Leipzig was the “Runde Ecke” memorial museum. Formerly the Stasi headquarters, the building has been a museum since 1990 and still contains the original furnishings and equipment. This creates an authentic, almost unpleasant atmosphere, and it exhibits the methods employed by the Stasi in a striking way. It made me realize how carelessly I treat my data online. The tech companies, most of which are based in the US, might not be comparable with the Stasi, but the exhibition did make me aware of the power of data ownership.

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Short nights, long discussions and a piece of the US in the middle of Berlin

Second stop: Berlin. The U.S. Embassy, the Sachsenhausen concentration camp, the Jewish Museum Berlin – our itinerary sparked numerous discussions. Our evening talks in Berlin grew longer and longer and the nights shorter and shorter. "Because of the EU, Germany is simply a few steps ahead of us" is how one young American summed up the situation in Germany from his perspective. Unconditional US patriotism? Far from it! Even though not everyone would endorse this view, it triggered some interesting discussions about the advantages and disadvantages of the EU.

Once inside the U.S. Embassy, we were immediately hit by the cool a/c air and knew we had entered US-American territory. We talked to Cultural Attaché David Mees about how the diplomatic service can influence the human rights situation in other countries. Although the interview taught me a lot about the

importance of this work, I came to the conclusion that this wouldn't be a job for me. Later on, we sat down with the initiators of the *Free Interrail* initiative and the activist duo *Herr&Speer* to discuss European identity and how men, too, can be feminists.

Enthusiasm and passion for volunteering

Four weeks after the Germany program, we flew to the US. Everywhere in Ann Arbor, we saw the big yellow or blue "M" logo, which stands for the University of Michigan (UoM) and its sports teams. But US-Americans aren't just into sport, they're also heavily involved in their communities. Interest in voluntary work seems much stronger in the US than in Germany. US citizens often have a lower tax bill, but this means the government has less money at its disposal so many areas of life depend on the involvement of individual people. One example is voluntary participation in a committee that develops proposals for environmental protection measures, which are then discussed and voted on by the local council.





This is time-consuming work, but people in Ann Arbor are passionate about it. We talked to four climate activists and realized their work has an impact – not just in the immediate neighborhood and on the UoM campus, but also at a local and national level.

During the last week of the program, we travelled by coach to Chicago. Walking through the city, we saw countless fast-food chains and realized that their popularity comes at a price: food containers are usually disposable, and plastic bags are free everywhere. Some young US-Americans have never heard of *Fridays for Future*. Chicago itself is a really cool city though, and it's beautifully located on Lake Michigan.

Representatives of the *Juvenile Justice Initiative* explained to us how they work with judges, lawyers, and politicians to improve youth justice in the US. Young people often receive disproportionately harsh sentences, and conditions in prisons – especially compared to Germany – are very poor. I'm fascinated by US-American activism, which often depends on the dedication of individual people.

Out of the comfort zone, into the political arena

After numerous meetings, we celebrated the end of our trip. We spent the last evening all together: 24 young participants and four supervisors. Needless to say, a few tears were shed! The next morning, we said goodbye, which we hoped would be a “see you later”. These had been four incredibly informative and inspiring weeks. We got on really well as a group and made many new friends.

My personal resume: I learnt a lot from the program and gained a different perspective of the US and also Germany. It also reinforced my view that it's worth taking an interest in social developments, getting involved in things, and stepping out of your comfort zone. I'll finish my bachelor's degree in summer 2022. Afterwards, I want to work in political consultancy for international security strategies – maybe even in Washington, D.C. ...

The next morning, we said goodbye, which we hoped would be a “see you later”.

Ambassadors in Sneakers was designed and is led by the *German-American Institute Tuebingen* (GAI or d.a.i.). It is supported by the Transatlantic Program of the Federal Republic of Germany with funds from the *European Recovery Program* (ERP) of the Federal Ministry for Economics and Energy (BMWi).

Anna Steinbrich (20) participated in the *Ambassadors in Sneakers* program as the representative of Vaihingen/Enz Youth Council (Baden-Württemberg) because she is passionate about cultural exchange and political discussions. She is currently pursuing a degree in Philosophy, Politics and Economics at the University of Oxford.

Felix Weinmann is deputy director of the *German-American Institute Tuebingen* (GAI or d.a.i.) and responsible for the *Ambassadors in Sneakers* project.

Web: dai-tuebingen.de/en/intercultural-projects/ambassadors-in-sneakers



Strengthening youth civic engagement in the USA and Germany

An interview with Robert Fenstermacher about the *German-American Sister Cities Youth Forum*

In 2021 the *American Council on Germany* brought together representatives of youth councils from five sister cities in Germany and the U. S.. The idea for this initiative came from the mayors of the cities themselves. In several online sessions and webinars, young people from Austin/Koblenz, Buffalo/Dortmund, San Antonio/Darmstadt, Charlotte/Krefeld and St. Louis/Stuttgart exchanged views on racism, climate change and youth participation. Project coordinator Robert Fenstermacher would like to see more of this in the future and tells IJAB about his experiences in the *German-American Sister Cities Youth Forum*.

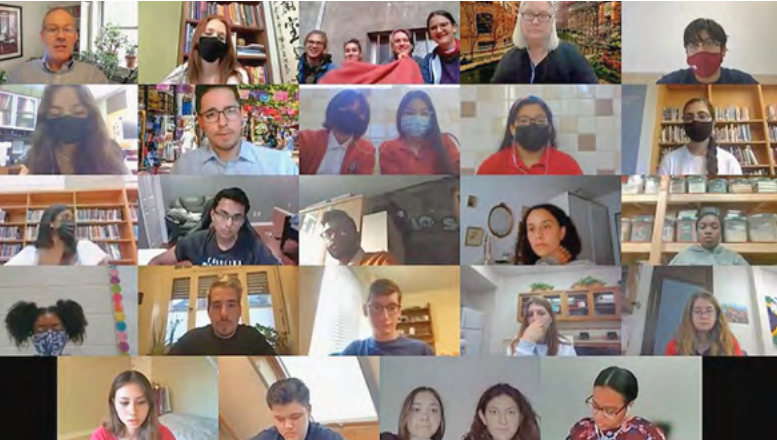
In 2021 the *German-American Sister Cities Youth Forum* brought together young civic leaders from Germany and the US. What's the idea of the project?

The main purpose of the project was to bring together representatives from local youth councils and youth leadership programs in five pairs of U.S.-German sister cities to have a transatlantic dialogue about issues confronting their local communities. Our hope was not only to build greater mutual understanding and collaboration between the youth, but also to help strengthen the relationship and ties between the sister cities so that future exchanges can take place among the next generation in these communities.

Who initiated this youth exchange?

This exchange is a direct result of a series of 2020 *Transatlantic Town Hall Meetings* with German and American mayors in the same sister cities in which the mayors discussed how their cities have adapted due to the pandemic and how their communities are rethinking plans for the future on issues like urban development and climate change, social equity and cohesion, and government engagement and communication with citizens. In each conversation, mayors specifically mentioned the need to engage more with youth in their communities on these issues, so the Youth Forum seemed like an obvious project to launch.





Young people face different challenges in their life depending on where they live and grow up. Yet, racial inequality, climate change and diversity seemed to be key issues keeping young people on both sides of the Atlantic on their toes. Why is it so valuable for young people to take a peek at civic life and engagement outside their own country?

Each individual community may have its own unique set of challenges, but issues like climate change and diversity, equity and inclusion are much bigger in scope. Learning how different communities and countries are attempting to tackle these issues (or not), understanding what the main challenges are, and recognizing the similarities in our societies allows youth to learn from, and support, one another. It also increases a mutual understanding that working on these issues is not just an American or German challenge, but something that is a responsibility for all of us regardless of where we live.

Terms such as racism, diversity and inclusion are often looked at and used differently in German and American contexts and discussing them can be challenging. Did this show in the youth forum and how did participants manage to create a safe space for open discussions around these topics?

Since words are used differently, we shared a glossary of terms related to diversity, equity, and inclusion that included words used in both the American and German contexts which helped participants communicate with one another with a greater understanding of their meaning. During our conversations, we wanted everyone to feel that they had a safe space to talk about these topics and to share information openly because we recognized that some of the topics are very sensitive and may be difficult for some to talk about. And given the community in this project represented youth from different backgrounds and walks of life, it was critical that everyone respect each other's opinions and perspectives. Therefore, the youth advisory council for the project early on created a docu-

ment called "Guiding Principles of Communication" that outlined standards for all the discussions. This included the concept of using a "safe word" to calm things down if a conversation became tense or someone felt attacked or insulted. There is only one rule—when someone uses the safe word, you stop. No more yelling, no more talking, nothing. You back down, you back away. No further discussion, disagreement or argument around that topic will occur until everyone has had a chance to cool off. I was impressed that the youth wanted to have guidelines like this to ensure the safe space. In the end, however, all of our conversations were free of conflict, very open and transparent, and incredibly respectful.

Looking at young civic engagement, what would you say appeared to be major differences with regards to the work of young civic leaders in Germany and the US?

To be honest, rather than see major differences regarding youth civic engagement, I think the exchange in fact highlighted how similar youth commitment to addressing issues in their communities is on both sides of the Atlantic. In all ten cities, youth are passionate about change, informing themselves about issues and pressing decision-makers in their schools and in their local governments to implement new policies. Perhaps one difference between Germany and the U.S. is that many of the American youth organizations are independent, nonprofit organizations, whereas the German organizations are formally affiliated with, and funded by, local government agencies. In some cases, the formal affiliation means that the youth have a stronger voice in policymaking. During the exchange, youth expressed a clear desire for their views to be heard, so participants liked the concept of official "youth councils" or "Jugendräte" that allow youth greater input into the decision-making for their communities.

The Sister Cities Youth Forum took place online. What opportunities lie in going virtual for exchanges like these?

Prior to this project, none of the youth organizations in the sister cities had had any contact with each other. The virtual exchange was a great way to begin conversations between the youth in both countries, to form relationships, and to start building mutual understanding on issues they face in their communities. Ideally, we hope that

the virtual exchange creates a foundation on which the youth organizations in the sister cities can build a sustainable, long-term relationship for further exchange and dialogue on these issues (and others) in the future, as well as in-person exchanges in their respective countries once the Covid-19 pandemic has been overcome.

One of the project's goals was to strengthen local youth engagement. One could argue that there are other ways to achieve this than transatlantic exchanges. What makes international exchanges such a unique civic learning opportunity for all parties involved?

As someone who personally took part in exchange programs to Germany, I believe they are extremely valuable because one is forced to step out of the daily life you consider to be normal and to look at issues from a different perspective. Both similarities and differences can lead to greater understanding or to finding best practices that can lead to better ideas and policies which improve the quality of life in communities. Overall, exchanges broaden people's horizons and openness to considering different ways of approaching issues while simultaneously trying to solve similar challenges or take advantage of common opportunities.

Looking at this from a municipal perspective, transatlantic exchanges can seem challenging and overwhelming, especially if built from the ground up. You are one of the initiators of the *German-American Sister Cities Youth Forum*. Do you have any advice for municipalities who wish to go forward with their idea of a German-American youth exchange?

My recommendation is to start small and to take advantage of virtual exchanges to start building a relationship before expanding to a larger in-person exchange that requires greater planning and funding to implement. And in terms of finding a partner in the other country for the exchange, there are 100 sister city partnerships between U.S. and German cities that can serve as a great foundation. From personal experience, each of the youth organizations approached for this project indicated that this type of exchange was on their "to do" list and was of great interest; all that was needed was someone to pick up the phone or to send an e-mail suggesting the idea. I'm also happy of course to provide more advice to anyone who calls me too!

Make a wish: What do you hope to see in the future in terms of German-American youth exchange?

Recent elections in both the United States and Germany showed that the next generation is engaged, committed, and motivated to take action on serious issues confronting our local communities and the world. My wish would be that our respective governments would invest more resources and dedicate greater funding to exchange opportunities that bring youth together to share ideas and learn from one another. Every one of the 100 sister city partnerships between Germany and the United States should have an exchange and the infrastructure to support them. Our governments talk about enhanced transatlantic cooperation, so as one of the participants in our exchange said, "Be the change you want to be."



Robert Fenstermacher is Chief Content Officer with the *American Council on Germany*. Following multiple experiences in Germany beginning with a high school exchange in West Berlin in 1987, he has pursued a 30-year career working on German-American exchange programs.

Web: acgusa.org

Shalia Ford, FOCUS St. Louis

Ms. Ford, why did your organization decide to participate in the *German-American Sister Cities Youth Forum*?

FOCUS St. Louis is the premier civic leadership organization, preparing diverse leaders from high school to C-Suite executives to work cooperatively for a thriving St. Louis region. At FOCUS we educate leaders, connect leaders and facilitate the important conversations. Our decision to partner with the *German-American Sisters Cities Youth Forum* was in alignment with our vision and mission as well as aspirations to connect students nationally and in-

The potential is great for continued youth engagement. Not only are youth able to connect during the virtual forums, but continue discussions between forums to foster understanding and build lasting relationships.



ternationally with leaders. Our intent was to expand their view on the critical issues of our times by participating in forums where students can learn from and lead with their German peers. This partnership encourages students to think globally about issues of racial equity, climate change and sustainability while promoting youth participation in civic life locally where change can be realized. Founded in 1989, *Youth Leadership St. Louis* is an internationally recognized program that informs, connects, prepares and empowers St. Louis area youth to become civic and community leaders.

What potential for local youth engagement do you see in transatlantic exchanges?

The potential is great for continued youth engagement. Not only are youth able to connect during the virtual forums, but continue discussions between forums to foster understanding and build lasting relationships. At a recent forum, a youth leader from St. Louis exchanged contact information with a youth leader from Stuttgart to share more about their Action Research Project done through participation in *Youth Leadership St. Louis*. Youth-led action research is an approach to scientific inquiry and social change grounded in principles of equity that engages young people in identifying problems relevant to their own lives, conducting research to understand the problems, and advocating for changes based on research evidence. This exchange was great to hear and see! We anticipate learning of more of these exchanges and connections.



Shalia Ford
Director, Leadership Programs,
FOCUS St. Louis, Missouri, USA

Web: [Youth Leadership St. Louis](https://www.youthleadershipstlouis.org)

John Schubert, Charlotte-Mecklenburg Youth Council

What did you learn about Germany that you didn't know before?

The thing I learned about Germany itself that most surprised me was how involved and motivated its youth are to be changemakers. Whenever anyone from the Americans would discuss a problem that we would have, the German youth were always the first to ask us what we were doing about it, sometimes pushing us to do more! The tenacity of these young leaders amazed me then and now.



John Schubert
Charlotte, North Carolina

Web: [Charlotte-Mecklenburg Youth Council](#)
(administered by *Generation Nation*)

Breonna Tuitt
Charlotte,
North Carolina

Web: [Charlotte-Mecklenburg Youth Council](#)
(administered by
Generation Nation)



Breonna Tuitt, Charlotte-Mecklenburg Youth Council

What motivated you to participate in the G-A Sister Cities Youth Forum?

I wanted to know what the political culture in Germany was like. I wanted to try and understand how Germany's government impacted the people and the way they lived, then compare this to the United States.

Ann Vadakkan, Austin Youth Council

What's your biggest takeaway from the experience?

My biggest takeaway from the experience is learning about a particular initiative the Germans used that I would like to implement in my school. Essentially, they created a way to track carbon emissions in their school to see how much certain factors in a school setting contributed to the overall carbon emissions. With this information, they were able to target certain areas where they could reduce carbon emissions. Putting this into effect in our school systems today could be a great way to decrease our carbon footprint.



Ann Vadakkan
Austin, Texas

Web: [Austin Youth Council](#)

With *YouthBridge* from Munich to New York

Eva Haller and Daniela Greiber

YouthBridge is a project initiated by the *European Janusz Korczak Academy* in which young people with diverse backgrounds, mother tongues, and religious beliefs complete a two-year leadership program. With their newly acquired knowledge and skills, the young people implement their own social, media, and cultural initiatives and build bridges between different communities. In 2018, participants from *YouthBridge* Munich visited their project partner in New York. Participant Daniela Greiber reports.

Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, SpongeBob, and Barbie – these were my first contacts with US-American culture. I didn't make the connection back then and even if I had, it probably wouldn't have meant anything to me. When I think about it today, I find it remarkable how closely connected the world is and how similar children in the US and Germany must be if they all enjoy these things and so many other shows and toys. The US was a country that interested me even when I was at school. We start learning English in third grade. "I like purple." "My favorite animal is a dog." "Today I am happy." The sentences were simple to begin with, but then lessons became more demanding. Our teachers told us we should be able to communicate with native speakers by the time we graduated high school.

Lots of potential for exchange and cooperation

Naturally, I felt very proud to be able to go to New York City with the *YouthBridge* Leadership Project and talk to so many different people about important, socially relevant issues. I realized again how many parallels there are: teenagers talking about their experiences at school, boys and girls playing basketball, a US-American transgender woman's fears that are almost identical to those of German trans women, and the problem of cat-calling, which women experience on both German and US-American streets. Potential for exchange and cooperation: 100 %.

Our values are already clearly formulated: the future needs justice, peace, and human kindness

We are all connected, thanks to globalization. At school, we are taught that globalization ensures that our value systems blend and mix. But so far, I can only really see this happening in the world of adults, in business and politics. Why don't policymakers fight harder for youth exchanges? We young people are the ones who are concerned now about our future and are taking to the





streets about the same problems in different countries. Just think of *Fridays for Future* or the *Black Lives Matter* movement.

It would definitely make sense to connect young Germans and US-Americans over their shared concerns and enable them to get to know each other. “We must live together as brothers [and sisters] or perish as fools” said Martin Luther King. I completely agree and think that the sooner we unite, the sooner we learn to live together, to fight mutual prejudices, stop radicalization and develop and strengthen our common values, the sooner we can spread our common values and allow them to have an impact all over the world.

Learning from each other and passing on what we have learnt

Initiatives like “YouthBridge” not only enable young people to build bridges between different communities in and around their own hometowns, they also actively stimulate intercontinental dialog between young people. During our trip to New York in 2018, we met participants from all kinds of projects. We talked to them and learned from them. This led to “YouthBridge” Munich bringing the Catcalls of New York project to our city in Germany.

This is what it can and should be all about – learning from each other and passing on what we’ve learnt. Germany and the US can learn a lot from each other. But for this to happen, we need open-minded young people who are motivated to shape their future. This is our mission.

The **European Janusz Korczak Academy** was founded in 2009 as a Jewish organization that is open to all social groups. Its goal is to strengthen and open the Jewish community and dispel prejudices prevalent among Jews and non-Jews. Since 2011, the Academy has run exchange programs between young adults, educators, and social workers from Munich and its US-American partner *JCC Kings Bay Y Brooklyn*. The Academy started the *YouthBridge* project in 2017. It is funded by Germany’s Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth.

Eva Haller is President of the *European Janusz Korczak Academy*. Participant **Daniela Greiber** is currently studying medicine at LMU Munich.

Web: youthbridge.eu

**Growing up in
New York and Berlin:
transatlantic street
work with the
*BronxBerlinConnection***

**An Interview with Olad Aden of
Gangway Berlin**



Under the name *BronxBerlin Connection*, the organization *Gangway – Straßensozialarbeit in Berlin* initiates exchanges between young creatives from Berlin and New York. Almost 300 young people have so far benefited from the project, including many young people who would otherwise have little access to an international experience. “We hope this is just the beginning!” says Olad Aden, Project Director at *Gangway e. V.* He reports to IJAB about a special exchange project between the cities on both sides of the pond.

Gangway e. V. – Straßensozialarbeit in Berlin has been running exchanges between young people in Germany and the US since 2008. What is BronxBerlinConnection all about?

Back in 2008 we were working with a group of 15 young adults, some of them fresh out of prison, and decided to organize a trip to New York. And we haven't stopped since. The project's platform is Hip-Hop culture, a movement that is still very popular on the streets of Berlin today. We bring together young people from New York and Berlin so that they can get to know each other and exchange ideas. They find out about different realities and get to see their own life from a new perspective. Hip-Hop is rooted in the urban communities of New York City, and this is where we spend our time: in the South Bronx, Harlem, Brooklyn. We learn about police brutality, racism, the connection between Hip-Hop and slavery, jazz and blues, and about activists like Malcolm X and Martin Luther King. We learn about gun laws, the lack of social services, and the impact this has on the people who need them. We also take part in workshops in prison and appear at events at the *Goethe-Institut* and the German Consulate.

International youth exchanges are possible with many countries in the world. Why the US, why New York?

Virtually no other country is as closely connected to Germany as the US. Hip-Hop came to Germany with the G.I.s who were stationed here, and it has since developed into an independent movement with its own distinct style, themes, and language. As the birthplace of Hip-Hop, however, New York is unique. This is where it all began, and virtually no other city holds such a fascination for young people. Young Berliners and New Yorkers have a lot in common alongside Hip-Hop. They have all grown up in a big city and are hence streetwise. Both cities are full of young artists, so it's difficult to stand out here. Many of the young participants are also of migrant background and have experienced racism.

Who do you work with on the US-American side? Who do your participants interact with?

Our New York partner is the *Hip-Hop ReEducation Project* based in Brooklyn. Currently, we are also working with numerous organizations such as the *Goethe-Institut NYC*, the U.S. Embassy in Berlin, *The Door* in Manhattan, and *Zulu Nation*. These contacts are the result of the project leader's personal connections plus years of networking.



Our project partners in New York work with socially disadvantaged young people who have grown up in the underbelly of these great cities. They can tell us about what it's like to have to assert themselves. Many of them have experienced latent racism and violence. Many have never left their own city, never mind their country.

You have made it your explicit mission to give young people with "difficult biographies" the chance to cross the Atlantic. On your website, you call that "Fulbright for the streets". Why is this important to you?

A whole range of opportunities to participate in international youth exchange projects are available to young people pursuing regular academic pathways. But what about those who don't have education on their radar? The ones who've made mistakes, who have maybe even served a prison sentence, and now want to be part of a society which they sometimes feel doesn't want them? For 13 years now, we have been witnessing what can happen if you take young people out of their environments for a while and take them to a completely different country. They learn, they grow, they look at their own lives from a different perspective. They make international friends, and most important of all, they set themselves very different, much bigger goals. In the new environment, they get a sense of achievement, and suddenly the world becomes a whole lot smaller. Many of them stay in touch years after they leave the project.

What does this kind of exchange mean to the young people and how do you prepare them for the exchange?

The experiences young people have during these exchanges are life-defining. After making transatlantic connections far away from home, they return with a different perception of themselves. Many of them set the bar much higher. They set themselves far more ambitious goals. They say, "I just made it to New York/Berlin! Who knows where I'll be going next!" In both Berlin and New York, young people are not always mobile in their own city. Many only know other neighborhoods from what they see on TV. Prejudices are formed by the media. To be able to take part in the project, participants have to attend briefing sessions in other parts of their city. In the following nine months, young people from all kinds of cultural and socio-economic backgrounds, who would normally have nothing to do with each other, meet and

The experiences young people have during these exchanges are life-defining. After making transatlantic connections far away from home, they return with a different perception of themselves.

sit around a table together. Quite often, these meetings are just as important as the transatlantic encounters.

In the preparatory phase, we meet regularly to discuss the history of New York City and the US. Obviously, our main interest is Hip-Hop and the story of its development, which is closely connected to social injustice. The young people also have the opportunity to present their skills on stage in New York, so we rehearse a show together. The videos we shoot in New York usually begin in Berlin. The young participants also set the rules and guidelines themselves and help put together the agenda.

What is the average age of your participants and how do they find out about the opportunity to go to the US?

As a street work organization in Berlin, we work with 14 to 27-year-olds, although the target group in this project tends to be between 18 and 24. The young people come to us through different channels. Many of them are already involved in our other workshops. Others find out about us through the workshops we run in prison. Sometimes, we have to approach businesses or authorities, for example if potential participants are involved in employment schemes. Others might contact us through other *Gangway* street work teams. And of course, many of them hear about the project through friends or on social media.

Street work originated in the US in the 1920s. Today, *Gangway e. V.* carries out street work in Berlin. Looking at your partners in the US, what are the differences between the kinds of social work that is done in the two cities? What can you learn from each other?

We operate under completely different conditions. Although we can no longer say that all young people are covered by a "social safety net" even in Germany, it does exist, and most young people here can benefit from it. Unfortunately, young people in New York rarely benefit from a safety net of this kind. Many of them come from really tough backgrounds and are often left to fend





Otherwise, we want to go much bigger: more exchange projects, in several cities, with several groups of young people.

What are you planning in the next few years in terms of US exchanges? What would you like to experience or achieve?

Depending on how the pandemic develops, we plan to host a group from New York here in Berlin in 2022. We're also planning to fly to New York with another group. For almost five months now, we've also been working with two youth groups from Berlin and Detroit ([#YAEDetroitBerlin](#) [Young Artist Exchange]). This has led to 12 musical collaborations. Next April, the group from Detroit will come to Berlin and in May, the group from Berlin will fly to Detroit for a return meeting. We're hoping to do a record release tour through both cities.

Otherwise, we want to go much bigger: more exchange projects, in several cities, with several groups of young people. Because this work is important. It sends out important signals to young people in the places where these projects are taking place.

for themselves. In the US, the concept of rehabilitation seems to be missing completely in work with youth who have gone off the rails, such as young people in the juvenile system, whereas we attach great importance to this in Germany. Another significant difference between the two cities is the level of violence resulting from different gun laws. In the US, disputes can quickly escalate into dangerous situations, so streetworkers there often have to intervene more swiftly. It would be unthinkable in Berlin and for Gangway colleagues to work in any way with the police, but colleagues in the US often must react differently. Because of the system, colleagues in New York and other US cities have to keep developing new, sometimes creative strategies to be able to work with young people long-term. We've been learning with and from each other for many years now.

Olad Aden is a street worker with Gangway, and a photographer and videographer in Berlin. In this capacity, he has organized many youth exchanges. He has organized and supported the German-US-American *BronxBerlinConnection* youth exchange since 2008.

Web: gangway.de/projekt/projekt-berlinbronxconnection

Youth work and human rights projects in the Pine Ridge Reservation

Michael Koch

Lasting, multiannual partnerships, particularly with a partner as special as the *Pine Ridge Reservation* in the US, do not come about by chance. Formerly a youth worker with the *Offenbach Youth Culture Office*, Michael Koch explains how important it is to have a personal relationship with the partner organization, to understand its history, and to really get to know and engage with each other.

How it all began

The youth projects between Offenbach and reservations in South Dakota, which are described below, initially sound like the result of a series of coincidences. When the two Offenbach youth workers Michael Koch and Claudia Weigmann-Koch spent a summer with the *Dene First Nation* People in the northern part of the Canadian province of Saskatchewan, just before they flew home their attention was caught by a leaflet calling for the exoneration of American Indian Movement activist Leonard Peltier, who had been imprisoned in the US for 24 years. That same night, they decided to set up the organization *Tokata-LPSG RheinMain e. V.* to support this prisoner and other Indigenous youth, cultural, and human rights projects. While working on their project, the two youth workers met Peltier's cousin, himself a youth worker on the *Pine Ridge Reservation* in South Dakota. They soon came up with the idea of collecting musical instruments and equipment for the young people on the reservation and donating them so they could set up a rock band and Hip-Hop production set. On a visit to the reservation in 2002, the head of the local youth center suggested handing over the donation together with a group of youngsters from Germany. Back in Offenbach, the idea proved popular in music and human rights circles as well

as with the city of Offenbach's youth services committee. Another important cooperation partner was found in the form of the organization *Arbeit und Leben Hessen*. World-famous rock and blues musicians¹ in the US and England found out about the project and decided to support the fundraising and youth exchange campaign, which took place for the first time in 2004, by holding charity concerts. This marked the start of an international youth work project that continued until 2017 and regularly brought together young Indigenous peoples of America and Germans. Altogether 110 young people from the Rhine-Main region and over 200 young Indigenous peoples of America took part in seven trips to the US and three projects in Offenbach. Instruments and other music equipment worth over \$ 50,000 were donated as part of the exchange activities, enabling local kids to make rock and rap music whenever they want.

This marked the start of an international youth work project that continued until 2017 and regularly brought together young Indigenous peoples of America and Germans.



Different realities as a conceptual basis

The Offenbach team already had several years' experience in international and intercultural youth work, including collaborations with *Arbeit und Leben Hessen*. A project in the US, however, and specifically with Indigenous peoples of America, was uncharted territory for everyone. But the trips in 2000 and 2002 as well as their prior experience with voluntary human rights work gave the youth workers sufficient foreknowledge of the living conditions, life perspectives, and interests of the young residents of the *Pine Ridge Reservation*, which they were able to draw on for their work. Social workers and teachers on the reservation had also engaged in an active dialogue with the Offenbach team since 2002. The *Pine Ridge Reservation*² represents the territory allocated by the US government to the *Oglala Lakota* people in South Dakota in the late 19th century. The reservation is considered one of poorest counties in the US. For young people, this means growing up with poverty, unemployment, lack of perspectives, racial discrimination, and undersupply of basic services. In the 1970s, People on the *Pine Ridge Reservation* staged mass protests against the continued repression and discrimination. It was also the site of civil war-like turmoil and fighting sparked by a corrupt *Oglala* tribal leader, who terrorized his own people with the help of state institutions.³ Together with the traumatic consequences of centuries of colonization, genocide, and ethnocide,⁴ it is hardly surprising that in many young Indigenous people this manifests psychologically in the form of (self-)destructive violence. Meanwhile, there is also enormous potential for creativity, artistic skill, and a commitment to sport. Whether rock or Hip-Hop, dance, painting, media productions or sculptures, horse riding, basketball or track and field, sport and culture have always been an important means for many young Indigenous peoples of America to express their strength and resilience. So, it seemed an obvious decision to design the program for the youth exchange along these lines, in the knowledge that music, media, and sports are among the top leisure activities of young Germans, too.

From project development to implementation

During the development phase of the project, various methodical elements of experience-based youth work were considered: international youth work, youth culture work, political education, sport, adventure education, media education, and group work.⁵ These elements produced an interesting mix of workshops, project visits, presentations, sports activities, discussions, and excursions, with each tour taking place under a different thematic focus (for example *Save Mother Earth*, or *Native Lives Matter*). During the two-week-long activities, approximately 28 young participants completed an action course lasting up to 16 hours each day. In their spare time, the young participants exchanged ideas on all kinds of subjects such as fashion and music, dreams for the future, sport and movies, friendship, and life in their respective home countries.

Meetings with a lasting impact – on both sides

The emotionally charged moments occasionally experienced during the exchange prompted the German project participants, in particular, to take a closer look at the realities of Indigenous populations. Many participants incorporated their experiences and knowledge in school projects and exams, or later in their college essays and theses. Some became involved in human rights work, while others kept in touch for years via social media and later even studied in the US. Similar observations were made among the young *Lakota*. Some later came to Germany, participated in collaborative projects, and visited their German friends. Others took part in exchanges in the US over a period of several years, later becoming involved in local youth centers as volunteers.

Requirements for US-German cooperation

While the overall concept and its versatility were undoubtedly key to the success of the projects, other factors also played a role. The projects were carefully prepared in advance. Not only did the Offenbach team have a sound knowledge of US-American history and geography, including the history of Indigenous life in the US, they were also able to lead rock, Hip-Hop, and media workshops. Their prior involvement in human

During the two-week-long activities, approximately 28 young participants completed an action course lasting up to 16 hours each day.



rights work meant they had a wide network of contacts with people and projects on reservations, earning them an additional level of trust. Successful collaborations depend on strong intercultural skills with regard to the Indigenous population of the US. After over five centuries of colonial history, Indigenous peoples of America are understandably sensitive to any form of intentional or unintentional appropriation and external control.

Another factor that contributed to the success of project planning was the possibility to hold on-site meetings with professional youth workers shortly before the actual projects. During these meetings, Indigenous and German youth workers could become better acquainted and decide on the parameters of the youth exchanges.

Another important prerequisite is financial support from federal programs or special funding schemes. No exchanges would have been possible without these subsidies. There is no program in the US that supports such projects for young US-Americans, like the German government's Federal Child and Youth Plan. The visits of our guests to Germany were made possible first and foremost with the financial support of well-known artists.

Michael Koch, is a former employee of the Offenbach Youth Culture Office.

- ¹ Among others: Ten Years After, Canned Heat, Louisiana Red, Robin Trower, Kraan, Animals, Wild Romance, Crazy World of Arthur Brown, Chris Farlowe, Man, and many more
- ² More information can be obtained from chapter "Reservationblues" in M. Koch / M. Schiffmann: "Ein Leben für die Freiheit – Leonard Peltier und der indianische Widerstand" [in German only]
- ³ More information can be obtained from chapter "Pine Ridge Reservation" in M. Koch / M. Schiffmann: "Ein Leben für die Freiheit – Leonard Peltier und der indianische Widerstand" [in German only], as well as from the movie "Thunderheart" from 1992, directed by Michael Apted
- ⁴ This includes the forced internment of hundreds of thousands of Indigenous children in the U.S. and Canada in boarding schools or their forced adoptions or placement in foster homes/families
- ⁵ The concept of "Experience-oriented youth (cultural and educational) work" [Erlebnisorientierte Jugend(kultur- und -bildungs)arbeit], Koch, M.: Wenn die Fachdiskurse miteinander tanzen. Erlebnisorientierte Jugendkulturarbeit als emanzipatorischer Beitrag zu Persönlichkeitsentwicklung, in: Bundesvereinigung kulturelle Jugendbildung e. V. (Hrsg.): Kulturarbeit und Armut, Remscheid 2000 [in German only]

“We have eight years left, so let’s go!”

An interview with activist Katharina Maier about Fridays for Future in the US

German-US-American activist Katharina (Kat) Maier was studying at Freie Universität Berlin when she came across a demonstration of the youth movement Fridays for Future there in 2018. An event manager who has campaigned for social issues for many years, she immediately started to help organize the movement. Returning to the States in mid-2020, she shifted her activism from Berlin to Washington, D.C. In an interview with IJAB, Katharina Maier describes what significance the initiative has in the US and explains how young people connect gender and race to activism and sustainability.

Kat, what is your current role with Fridays for Future USA?

When I returned to the US from Germany, I'd just planned to continue working with Fridays for Future. But then I found out the movement in the US had already broken up in early 2020. Activism is common in the US, though, so you soon find organizations you can get involved with.

This was how I got to know people. At the end of 2020, three of us got together and we asked ourselves whether we needed Fridays for Future, or whether we should invest our energy in networks and initiatives that already exist. We came to the conclusion that Fridays for Future serves different niches and people, and it has different strengths. And so, the three of us relaunched the movement in the US.

We have no hierarchy or titles. So, I'd say my role is that of an organizer, coordinator, and generally activist at the national level. We initially set up Fridays for Future at a national level as a hub to pool resources and knowledge and help others set up local groups. I'm currently in Wa-

shington, D.C. and we've also been trying to start a local group here, but COVID has slowed everything down a bit.

From what you say, I understand that activism is much more widespread in the US than it is in Germany. Is that correct?

Yes and no! Activism in the US is just organized differently and there are different opportunities. I definitely wouldn't say it's better. For example, in the US activism is considered by non-activists to be much more radical, but at the same time there are far more organizations that people can get involved with in all kinds of ways. It's really easy to set up your own organization in the States. As long as you present yourself well on social media, no one knows whether there's two people behind you or two hundred. As a result, activism in the States is very fragmented compared to Germany, and so collaboration is not always effective.

Is there financial support? Maybe even federal or regional public funding?

There is no funding from the government, except perhaps in the form of tax relief, but donations from charities as well as endowment funds are common here. We're not an officially recognized organization, so endowment funds are not really relevant for us. Plus, applying for and managing such funds is a resource-intensive business and a major hurdle for grassroots organizations if they have no permanent staff. We're really lucky that we have a donation account. As an open collective, the account is fully transparent. Anyone can see the transactions.



What did your friends and family think about you relaunching the movement, and how did your peers react to your involvement?

I really had a culture shock when I came back to the States. Sustainability and environmental protection are seen as new issues here. They're considered radical. Whenever I brought up sustainability in normal conversations in my previous job, everyone used to say "Oh, here goes Kat again...!" Even though the environment is talked about on the news, it's viewed in a different way to other issues and not taken very seriously. Today, almost all of my friends are activists. Many others had no idea about the kind of activism we're involved in with Fridays for Future. They were more familiar with the kind of voluntary work that involves helping out in a soup kitchen or an animal shelter. They support me because they know and love me. My mother is now passionate about sustainability. She's always supported sustainability, but now the term actually carries meaning!

Do you notice a difference here between the generations in terms of how the issue is radicalized?

I do think that this kind of activism is a new concept here. It's much more difficult to go on strike under labor laws in the US than it is in Germany, which is why people rarely strike. I also think that sustainability as an issue has not yet arrived in the US. It's seen more as a trend.

So how does environmental education work in schools or in other settings?

It's being introduced more and more, but usually by individual teachers who happen to have a strong personal commitment to the topic. School curricula change very slowly here. That's why private initiatives and organizations that fill this gap and develop educational material on the environment for schools are so important.

Cue Parents for Future. How much support does the movement get from parents and schools?

Because of COVID, we haven't had that many demonstrations here yet. But I can't remember having seen schools or classes at any kind of demonstration. The school system puts so much pressure on students to get good grades that many wouldn't skip class simply because of this. It would be better if these kinds of activities were offered as extramural activities. I have relatively few interactions with parents; it's actually more the grandparents who write to us to say they want to support us. I think we need to seize the opportunities here in the US to get them involved too.



You've already mentioned the differences and similarities between the US and Germany. Are there any other points you would like to highlight?

Something that perhaps hasn't been mentioned explicitly is that we all have to take personal action. We all have a personal responsibility to act and think about how we shape our society. But in the US, the narrative that responsibility for everything lies with the individual is created artificially and deliberately nurtured by the oil and gas industry to make people feel alone and powerless in the struggle for greater sustainability.

Escaping this cycle by talking to others and turning individual into collective action is something people in Germany have done much better than in the US. People here tend to either feel powerless or claim everything is a lie. There are few people in the US who are in the middle.

Are there US-specific issues for Fridays for Future? Issues that are discussed differently in the US than in Germany?

Race and gender identity play a much bigger role here. This has changed a lot in the US in recent years. In Germany, the focus has also shifted more towards climate justice, but not as much as here. No matter the topic of debate, whether it's poverty or climate, everything is viewed through the lens of the racism and gender identity debate. If you don't mention it explicitly, you're soon reminded of it in activist circles. There are advantages and disadvantages to all of this. It makes us take a closer look at these issues, but it also encourages cancel culture. We are all working to achieve the same goal, but we're not necessarily working together yet. We're getting too caught up with details, projects aren't finished, we're wasting people, time, and energy. And yet I am trying not to suppress these discussions. We need to have them at a time when so many people feel they're neither seen nor



heard. This is why I try to place the subject in a broader social context. There's no wrong or right in activism. We want to give young people safe spaces where they can try things out. We're activists who are doing this for the first time. We are learning and doing things simultaneously.

How are you organized nationally? How do you communicate? Do you use digital tools or do you have a platform where you meet?

We call ourselves a network. Everyone can be part of this network, or they can set up a local group. But there are lots of groups in the US that just set themselves up and do their own thing without connecting to us. Within our network, we use Slack and try to connect with people from the local groups. If someone tells us they want to join in, we say, fine, here's a local group, you can join them. Or we tell them there isn't a local group but that we can help them set one up. So, everyone who's active at the national level is also involved in a local group and can participate in the working groups at that level. For example, a local group's social media rep can join the national working group for social media and can connect there with social media reps from other local groups.

Within the network, there are currently 22 local groups and 81 people are signed up to Slack. So, we're still relatively small. Some local groups, like the one in New York, are big, others are very small and consist of only two or three members. But we still managed to mobilize 45,000 people to attend a major demo.



One of the German government's current initiatives aims to intensify and develop youth exchanges with the US. Do you think there is an opportunity here for Fridays for Future as a youth initiative?

This would be very useful for Fridays for Future. Compared to other grassroots organizations, we already have a broad international base, which enables us to learn from each other. How do others do things? What else should we focus on? How can we tackle subjects in a different way? Those kinds of things. It's important that young people meet people from other countries who are dealing with the same issues.

Can international youth exchanges be sustainable? This question is discussed a great deal in youth organizations in Germany. What do you think?

It's true that we experience more of the world and are better connected globally thanks to technology and the internet, so we could reduce the amount we travel. But a Zoom call, even if it's planned to be fun, is not the same as an actual in-person meeting. What's important is that we plan trips more consciously. For instance, it shouldn't be considered normal to jet off somewhere for a long weekend. If we travel, we should stay for longer and spend our time more meaningfully.

I do believe that we have to explore the world because it supports our personal development, and you can't get that kind of experience through social media.

Katharina Maier is a Fridays for Future activist and assistant to the President and Vice-President of the Center for International Environmental Law (CIEL) in Washington D.C.

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Tri-city youth worker exchange: Chicago-Hamburg- Birmingham

Gabriele Scholz

Twin-town partnerships are a good way of building long-term international relationships, as demonstrated by the sister cities of Hamburg and Chicago, which have been twinned for over 25 years. The partnership developed further in the tri-city project, which turned into a trilateral youth worker exchange when it was joined by the English city of Birmingham. The colleagues on both sides of the Atlantic have plenty of subjects to discuss, but they also have one or two challenges.

For centuries, people from all over the world have been magnetically drawn to the United States of America, the "land of opportunity," as it is often called. This also includes Germans who crossed the Atlantic in large numbers, quite often from Hamburg, to start a new life in the New World. The United States is still a popular, if not *the* most popular, travel destination for many people, including the younger generation. Between 10,000 and 13,000 students spend time at a US-American high school as part of a school exchange every year.

The United States also plays an important role in the context of international youth work. This is particularly true of Hamburg-based youth work professionals who work in child and youth services. An exchange with the United States, especially Chicago, is an interesting and attractive opportunity for them. What started out 25 years ago in 1996 as a bilateral exchange between the sister cities of Chicago and Hamburg has since developed into a tri-city exchange with Birmingham in the UK and has become an integral part of the city's international youth work activities. Several hundred youth workers and professionals from child and youth services but also other areas of social work have participated in the programs, forged professional and personal ties, and gained a wide range of experiences as a result of the close cooperation between the *National Association of Social Work (NASW)* in Chicago, Birmingham city council, and Hamburg's youth welfare office.

Health protection, digitalization, urbanization: There's lots to talk about

Like youth exchanges, the youth work expert exchange with Chicago is designed as a face-to-face, on-site meeting. Participants visit projects and institutions in the respec-



tive host city and speak to representatives from universities, politics, and administration. They discuss their practical experiences and the impact that policies have on their work, and through this expand their knowledge of theories and concepts. Their topics are as diverse as work in child and youth services. Health protection, digitalization, city expansion, or dealing with the rise of populism and nationalism are





discussed alongside new concepts in social work, such as *Signs of Safety* or social space orientation.

Not just a good network: What makes expert exchange programs successful?

Planning and organizing exchanges, however, can be a challenging undertaking. Their success depends not only on the commitment and personal relationships of the organizers. In addition to language barriers (the working language is English), which can be intimidating for younger German youth work experts, resource issues also play a major role. This is particularly true for US-American youth work experts. Unlike the German participants, who are supported by *Federal Child and Youth Plan* and local Senate funds, the youth work experts from Chicago not only have to pay for the ten-day trips out of their own pockets, but they also have to organize them in their free time. In the absence of government funding, the success of incoming projects ultimately depends on finding enough sponsors to fulfil the host principle, whereby the host organization covers the costs incurred by the program in its own country. Consequently, it is sometimes difficult to recruit committed youth work professionals for the duration of a ten-day exchange.

It is therefore especially gratifying to see that a viable network of committed supporters has nevertheless emerged in and between the three cities over the years, in partnership with policymakers and universities. The network has even managed to survive the COVID-19 pandemic. Indeed, the tri-city exchange appears to have lost none of its appeal under the changing conditions. The digital formats of 2020 and 2021 even seem to have encouraged the participation of both German and US youth workers who might not have taken part under "normal" circumstances.

Face-to-face meetings during the pandemic

Feedback from participants reflects the importance of international exchanges especially during a pandemic. Participants welcomed the opportunity to forget about the demands of everyday life for a while and gain a broader perspective, but also to see they were not the only ones facing the impacts of the pandemic.

Although they are no substitute for personal meetings, online formats have proven they can effectively complement face-to-face formats. This experience will serve the organizers well as they continue to strengthen international youth work ties with Chicago (and Birmingham) both for youth work experts and children and young people, and to exploit their inherent benefits. Digital formats should enable interested parties to regularly discuss selected topics in an informal setting without requiring too much time or organizational effort, and to forge professional and personal ties throughout the year. Ideally, this will help make international youth work an integral part of youth work experts' everyday practice and encourage them to organize international activities for young people. There are certainly enough things to talk about.

Gabriele Scholz, Head of National Support and Counselling with Hamburg's Social Security Authority – State Youth Welfare Office in the Office for Families, Hamburg Social Security Authorities.

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Forty years of youth exchanges with the US

Axel Wiese

The town-twinning agreement between Norfolk, Virginia, and the Wilhelmshaven-Friesland region in Lower Saxony has existed since 1976, and the *Deutsch-Amerikanische Gesellschaft Wilhelmshaven-Friesland* has been filling this partnership with life for 40 years. Its annual youth exchange program offers young people from the region the chance to breathe in some transatlantic air.

Mr. Doumar proudly shows the young visitors to his restaurant on Monticello Avenue in Norfolk, Virginia the original waffle cone machine that has been producing ice-cream cones for over one hundred years. His great-uncle Abe Doumar exhibited the machine at the St. Louis World's Fair for the first time in 1904, so the ice-cream cone has its roots not in Italy, but in the US!

In Doumar's restaurant, the young German guests learn what the American way of life is all about: pride in their inventiveness, strong family bonds and, not least of all, their hospitality. The visitors receive a warm welcome at the traditional restaurant and can try the ice-cream, but also burgers, sandwiches, hotdogs, and other specialties.

First-hand experience of everyday US-American life

It's experiences like this that make the youth exchanges of the *Deutsch-Amerikanische Gesellschaft Wilhelmshaven-Friesland* (DAG) and the *Norfolk Sister Cities Association* (NSCA) so special. During the trip, the young participants stay with local host families where they can experience

normal everyday life in the US first-hand. The host families also organize barbecues, pool parties, or soccer matches for their guests.

The Hampton Roads Area, which includes Chesapeake Bay and the cities of Norfolk, Virginia Beach, Hampton, Chesapeake, Newport News, Williamsburg, and Portsmouth, offers numerous other attractions such as the Nauticus Museum, the Adventure Park, the Chrysler Museum of Art, the Virginia Aquarium and Marine Science Center, the Naval Station, and the Bush Gardens Theme Park. Some families even take their German guests

further afield to Shenandoah National Park or New York City. One of the highlights of the last exchange in Norfolk was an appearance on a live TV show at a regional TV station. The young visitors actively joined in the program and reported on the exchange program activities.

A slice of European-US-American history

The exchange program also includes a visit to Hampton University, one of the first universities to open its doors to African Americans after the abolition of slavery, and



a tour of one of Virginia Beach's biggest employers, the German company *Stihl*, which shows young visitors the various career opportunities it offers. Virginia Beach is home to the First Landing State Park, where the colonization of the North American continent first began. Jamestown on the Elizabeth River was the first permanent European settlement. Colonial Williamsburg, the largest living history museum in the US, and the American Revolution Museum offer visitors an immersive north American history experience.

Lifelong friendship

But it is contact with peers from the other country that makes this exchange so special for the young participants. "My daughter Meret met Maggie through the exchange. It was a meeting of soulmates. Since they met five years ago, barely a day has gone by when they haven't been in touch," reports one mother enthusiastic-

ly. "The two young women, now both college students, recently met halfway in Iceland," adds Axel Wiese, who has been organizing and supporting the German side of the exchange program for DAG for several years. "Any student over 15 who has a sufficient command of English can participate. Students stay with host families, so they're supposed to communicate a lot. It's a concept that benefits everyone," explains DAG President Imke Oltmanns.

Give and take for the transatlantic exchange

Organizing the youth exchange involves a lot of voluntary work. This is why the organization expects participants to be members of the DAG for at least two years and also to host US students, since it is a reciprocal exchange that takes place on an annually rotating basis. Alongside the youth exchange, the young mem-





bers can also join in networking activities or take part in events such as the traditional Thanksgiving dinner in late November. Turkey, sweet potatoes, vegetables, corn, and cranberry sauce, with brownies and ice-cream for dessert – the festive meal is celebrated just as it is on the other side of the pond. This is where current exchange participants can meet former program

Alongside the youth exchange, the young members can also join in networking activities or take part in events such as the traditional Thanksgiving dinner in late November.

participants and share stories. "And at every Thanksgiving dinner, something special is organized. Last year, for example, members of the Wilhelmshaven baseball club explained the complex rules of the game in a really striking and interesting way," adds Imke Oltmanns.

A reunion on the East Coast

In addition to the youth exchange, an adult exchange is also being planned for 2023 under the direction of well-known USA specialist Dr Wolfgang Grams of Oldenburg. For many years now, Dr Grams has organized trips to the United States that follow the trail of German immigrants, especially those from north-western Germany. The current itinerary for the next trip to the East Coast is New York City via Washington, Norfolk, and Charleston to Atlanta, including a three-day stay with friends in Norfolk.

The youth exchanges of the *Deutsch-Amerikanische Gesellschaft Wilhelmshaven-Friesland* are funded by the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth.

Axel Wiese is a youth officer with the *Deutsch-Amerikanische Gesellschaft Wilhelmshaven-Friesland* and has organized youth exchanges with Norfolk, VA since 2015. He is a teacher at the Alexander-von-Humboldt-Schule in Wittmund, Lower Saxony.

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Kolping Jugend- gemeinschaftsdienste Workcamps* in the US

Annette Fuchs with Andy Gracklauer
and Friederike Knörzer

What do young volunteers experience in workcamps in the US, and how do these experiences impact their lives as adolescents in Germany? *Kolping Jugendgemeinschaftsdienste (JGD)* have been organizing workcamps in the US for over 20 years. We ask Annette Fuchs, Head of *Kolping JGD*, and Andy Gracklauer and Friederike Knörzer, workcamp leaders, to give us their assessment.

Who, when, what? Background information about the work-camps

Kolping JGD have been offering workcamps in the US for over 20 years. The workcamps in Los Angeles and San Diego were initiated by a project partner who had been transferred from Uganda to the US. As a pastor, he knew lots of people in the community. He reached out to projects and host families and initially supervised the groups himself. We're currently working with the *St. Francis Center* in Los Angeles which looks after homeless people, for example by making breakfast and handing out food parcels. The partnership has worked really well so far. The volunteers and project partners are both very happy with the arrangement. The US workcamps are in high demand and take place up to three times a year. They are supported by *Federal Child and Youth Plan* funds and contributions from participants.

Getting to know a "cool" country, but also serving the community

Young people's interest in volunteering, and at the same time improving their English and getting to know the country better, is what led to the establishment of the workcamps in the US. The program targets 16 to 26-year-olds who can speak English, in other words high school and college students and trainees or apprentices. First and foremost, of course, they want to experience the US they are familiar with from the media: a "cool" country with interesting people and vast landscapes with lots of beautiful national parks. The fact that they also have to deal with social problems and can work in these areas and learn things that are important for their own lives, is what makes workcamps here so interesting for them.

Same same but different – What makes collaboration with the US so special?

Getting to know a culture that inspires younger generations, a culture that seems so similar and yet is very different to their own, is an exciting experience for young people. No special subjects are planned. Discussions about capitalism and its advantages and disadvantages come quite naturally. Compared to our other workcamps, which take place mostly in the Global South, the standard of living in the US is much higher, so it's shocking to see how many people in the US live in poverty and how quickly they can fall through the social safety net. We usually associate Los Angeles with wealth, Hollywood and movie stars, so it is all the more disturbing to see people living in tents on streets right in the middle of L. A.

Workcamp leader Friederike Knörzer talks about the collaboration with the *St. Francis Center* in Los Angeles:

"Because of its political system, the United States is a country where people are easily driven into homelessness. And it's extremely difficult to get out again. The vicious cycle of unemployment, homelessness, and social exclusion is hard to break, and lots of people fall off the grid for all kinds of reasons. There are organizations in the country that try to help them but there are still too few of them. The social security system cannot be compared to the German system; the state offers virtually no support. The *St. Francis Center* tries to meet people's basic needs and also helps the homeless with formalities. Doctors regularly call by. Many people come to the center on a daily



basis. The St. Francis Center is a place where they can meet, chat, and see a familiar face.

The international exchange program with the *St. Francis Center* shows the homeless people here that even people from other parts of the world are interested in them. The volunteers have more time than the employees at the Center to sit down for a chat. There are generally lots of opportunities for conversation. Volunteers and visitors share moments of joy when they try to teach each other

The international exchange program with the St. Francis Center shows the homeless people here that even people from other parts of the world are interested in them.

words in their own language. Some of the homeless people greeted and thanked each other in broken German, while the volunteers tried to say a few words in Spanish. The Kolping program gives the homeless what is really missing from their lives: time, attention, and respect.”

Between homelessness and wealth: The effect of inequality on the young participants

Andy Graucklauer, leader of the workcamp in spring 2019, describes the impact the program has on participants:

“I’d say the workcamp volunteers gained valuable experiences for their personal development, and that these will have a positive impact on them in the long term. The contrast between the lives of the homeless on the streets and the relative wealth of the volunteers’ host families was especially thought-provoking. The gap between rich and poor is sometimes shocking; it’s not something people in Europe tend to associate with the *American Dream*. On the one hand, lots of US-Americans live a life of abundance; on the other, many people here

are so desperate they depend on soup kitchens. The participants and I, as project leader, were fortunate enough to get to know both sides of the US in this workcamp and gain a comprehensive view of life in southern California, which could not be more diverse. I think many returnees from this workcamp in Los Angeles will think twice before throwing food away again. It teaches us not to take our own prosperity for granted and to appreciate it more.”

Sustainable impact of social engagement

Friederike Knörzer confirms these views:

“The participants realized that homelessness could affect anyone. Many were surprised who it can happen to and how quickly. They gave a lot of thought to this issue during the workcamp. They discussed their views amongst each other and with program leaders, reflected on their own circumstances and attitudes to wealth, and considered ways to get involved in social projects at home. One participant is about to start a Voluntary Social Year, and several participants assured me this would not be their last workcamp.”

*Workcamps are short-term non-profit volunteer placements for young people from different countries, usually in a social, ecological or cultural project.

Annette Fuchs is Head of Kolping Jugendgemeinschaftsdienste Kolpingwerk Deutschland gGmbH. **Friederike Knörzer** and **Andy Graucklauer** have led workcamps in the US.

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“School exchanges with the US have a long tradition”

Anna Wasielewski

Long-term youth and student exchanges with the United States go back a long way at Arbeitskreis gemeinnütziger Jugendaustausch AJA, the umbrella organization of non-profit youth exchange organizations, and its members. Driven by the idea that exchanges with the former enemy serve reconciliation and peaceful coexistence in a democratic society, the first transatlantic exchanges, most of them organized on a voluntary basis, took place over 80 years ago.



The former pioneers of non-profit student exchange programs have developed into globally networked organizations over the years. Today, AJA-organizations enable around 4,000 German high school students to take part in a long-term exchange (a full academic year or semester) in over 50 countries around the world.

Exchanges are not a one-way street. Around 2,000 students from around the globe also come to Germany through AJA organizations every year, enabling host families to enjoy intercultural experiences without spending time abroad themselves. The offices of the AJA organizations are supported by a network of around 10,000 volunteers.

AJA programs are designed as non-formal intercultural learning programs that teach the young participants numerous personal and intercultural skills. This is supported by intensive preparation and follow-up as well as pedagogical supervision during the exchange. The AJA organizations and their exchange programs have been making an important contri-

bution towards international understanding and strengthening civil society as well as peace and democracy education for many years.

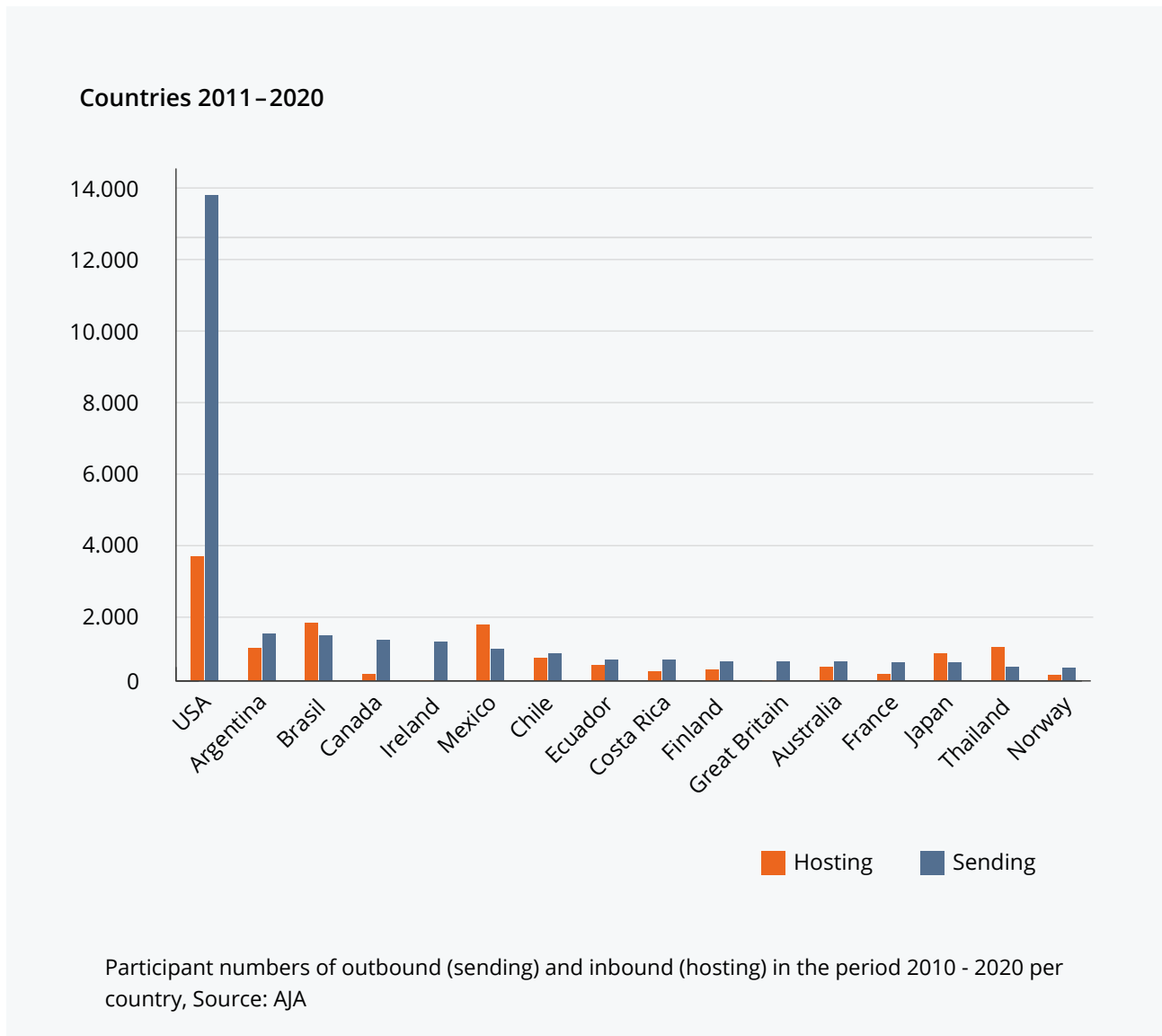
Although the program now spans a large number of countries, exchanges with the US continue to be the most popular in the AJA organizations. The US is the top-ranking exchange country for young people in Germany. The AJA data report, which was published for the first time in June 2021, shows that participant numbers have remained consistently high for years.

The US is the top-ranking exchange country for young people in Germany.

Every year, around 40 percent of all AJA exchange program participants complete their exchange year or semester in the US. Since 2010, almost 14,000 students from Germany have visited the US through AJA.

The unique relationship between the two countries is also reflected in the *Congress-Bundestag Youth Exchange*. Since 1983, the German Bundestag and U.S. Congress have covered the costs





of the transatlantic exchange year with this full scholarship for around 300 young people from the US and Germany, who represent their country as *Junior Ambassadors*. The program also supports young professionals. Five of the AJA organizations have been carrying out the *Congress-Bundestag Youth Exchange* program on behalf of the German Bundestag for many years.

On the US side, AJA organizations work with partner organizations from their own network or with external partners, depending on the structure of their organization. They are responsible, among other things, for placing guest students from Germany with host families and providing on-site support. The importance of this robust international network was demonstrated not least during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Given current global challenges such as the climate crisis and anti-democratic tendencies in numerous countries, it is becoming clear that the founding principle of the AJA organizations has lost none of its relevance. Long-term, individual student exchanges with the US continue to be an important element of international youth work.

Anna Wasielewski is a member of the management team of AJA (Arbeitskreis gemeinnütziger Jugendaustausch).

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Intercultural exchange and new perspectives for young people and host families

In conversation with Bettina Wiedmann and Rüdiger Muermann from the non-profit exchange organizations Experiment and Partnership International

IJAB: Why are you so passionate about international student exchanges?

Rüdiger Muermann: I did a six-week reciprocal exchange in Johannesburg, South Africa, through *Rotary Jugenddienst Deutschland e. V.* just as apartheid was coming to an end and the first democratic elections were happening in 1994. Even though this format was short compared to the one-year academic exchanges, it was really formative for me. Since then, various other exchanges and periods abroad have defined my life. I did language-learning stays in England, France, and Spain, was a host brother or classmate to guests from South America, and then I ended up studying in Melbourne, Australia for a year, so I had some interesting experiences.

Over the years, these experiences triggered an interest in foreign cultures and political exchange. I have loved working with the non-profit *Partnership International* since 2005 and helping to promote peace and dialogue.

There is nothing quite like attending school abroad or living with a host family you initially know nothing about. My colleagues and I are always fascinated to see how young people flourish during and after an exchange. The AJA member organi-



zations support their students before, during, and after their exchange year. Thanks to the structure of their organizations, participants can volunteer and become actively involved in their community.

I'm glad that in my everyday life I can promote the idea of intercultural exchange because this is something that has been so formative for me.

Bettina Wiedmann: I totally agree with Mr Muermann. The experiences I had during my own exchange are what made me so passionate about the subject, too. My exchange career started with a

two-week exchange in Great Britain, followed by a three-week exchange as part of a twin-town program with a host family in Peoria, Illinois. After those three weeks, I just knew I had to spend a year at a US high school. I was lucky enough to be placed with an amazing host family

in Arlington, Virginia, and I'm still in contact with them today.

Apart from my experiences as a participant, hosting students from the US and Brazil also had an enormous impact on me and my whole family.

I'm glad that in my everyday life I can promote the idea of intercultural exchange because this is something that has been so formative for me. Interestingly, my organization, Experiment, has its roots in the US. Our founder, Donald B. Watt, was passionate about cultural exchanges between the US and Germany back in 1932 and laid the foundations for the oldest non-profit exchange organization in Germany.

Why do you think the US is still one of the most popular countries for international student exchanges?

Rüdiger Muermann: The US is very present in the minds of young people all over the world. Young Germans en-



counter US-American culture from an early age through movies, TV shows, and music. This inspires teenage dreams about the US, for example about spending a year at a US high school. Another factor is that US-German student exchanges have been run by various programs in both countries for many years. One example is the *Congress-Bundestag Youth Exchange*, which has offered scholarships for US-German exchanges since 1983.

Many US-American families have welcomed German students into their homes. Why do they do it?

Bettina Wiedmann: First of all, I think that US-Americans are generally very open and enjoy welcoming people into their homes. They also want to share their culture with other people. Something that's rather alien to us Germans but very strong in the US is patriotism. US-Americans are incredibly proud of their country and culture, and because of this they want to share it with others. But US-American families are also interested in learning about cultures different to their own. The US is a big country, and not all US-Americans have the chance to travel internationally. They vacation in their own country, and unless they live near an external border, they often have little contact to cultures outside the US. Hosting an exchange student is a relatively easy way to broaden one's cultural horizons.



Stepping outside their comfort zone can shake up routines and give them fresh perspectives.

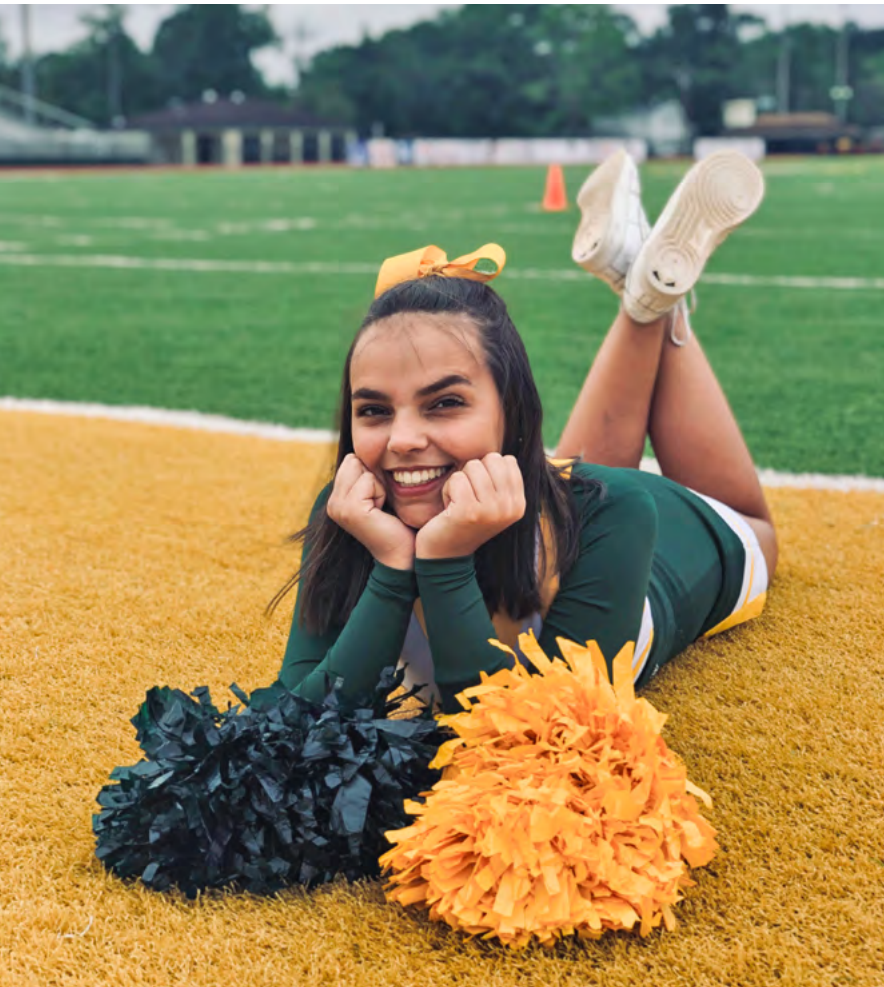
Rüdiger Muermann: I agree, the main motivation for many host families is their interest in intercultural exchange and a chance to look beyond their horizons. Some of the families have German roots and welcome the opportunity to find out more about their heritage by taking in German students.

Why should German families choose to host students from the US?

Rüdiger Muermann: Many of our host families report that bringing students from other cultures into their homes for a longer period can enrich family life. It makes them think about their own family structures in a different way. Stepping outside their comfort zone can shake up routines and give them fresh perspectives. For host families, taking in a guest student builds intercultural understanding, eliminates prejudices, and paves the way for an open global community.

Bettina Wiedmann: Having hosted myself, I can definitely confirm this. I'd even go so far as to say that it's interesting to host a guest from the US for a while precisely because we think we know the US so well from the media. But it is so much more than McDonalds and basketball, or Trump and Obama. The US is a very diverse country. We often have a certain impression of it that is influenced by the media, and we form our own opinion based on this. I think it would be beneficial for us all to host an exchange student from the US. It can help us understand the country better, or when opinions differ, at least help us respect different points of view even if we don't share them.





In the last few years, the US has undergone a lot of changes, including some domestic challenges. Do you notice any of this in your work or in your collaboration with US-American partner organizations?

Rüdiger Muermann: The domestic challenges in the US haven't had a major impact on collaboration with our partner organizations, but they have indeed led to some interesting experiences for our exchange students. In 2020, for example, we sent one of our students, who was very interested in politics, to Texas. He was there on one of our scholarships so was required to write progress reports, which he did in a very interesting way. For example, he wrote about the US elections from his perspective as a German exchange student in Texas. His experiences gave him a new outlook and taught him the importance of student exchanges.

You obviously have a lot of contact to colleagues in the US. What are the challenges of these transatlantic collaborations? Do you sometimes have to overcome intercultural hurdles?

Bettina Wiedmann: I think all collaborations face occasional conflicts and challenges. Conflicts are not a bad thing per se; first and foremost, they're occasioned by different interests. Add cultural idiosyncrasies to the mix and you just need a bit more time to resolve the conflict.

It's really interesting, even amusing, when both sides undergo intercultural training and then try it out on their partners. US-Americans suddenly communicate with German directness, or the Germans start talking about the weather... Eventually, they meet again somewhere in the middle and look for a solution that suits them both.

Ultimately, collaborations with US partner organizations are like transatlantic student exchanges. Once people get to know each other personally and meet as equals, they can resolve any conflicts and find ways to reconcile their respective interests. And this is exactly what we want to foster with our work.

Bettina Wiedmann is Managing Director of Experiment and Rüdiger Muermann is a member of the management team of Partnership International. Both organizations are members of AJA (Arbeitskreis gemeinnütziger Jugendaustausch).

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