

Zsófia Zádor

2012 Hungarian Ben Franklin Fellow's summary of her experiences

Introduction

My own American dream started when I got selected as a participant in the Benjamin Franklin Transatlantic Fellows Institute. I didn't know back then that the abbreviation BFTF will not only mean the name of the program but also „Best Friends Together Forever”.



On the 30th June I was standing at the airport, it was too early to be awake but my flight was leaving at 6 am to Frankfurt. After spending 4 hours at that huge airport all alone just 20 minutes before boarding I found a group of people who were just as excited as I was so I went up to them and was relieved that I found some other fellows. Of course after landing in Washington, D.C. at 3 pm we had to wait another 6 hours as our plane was delayed. When we finally arrived to **WAKE FOREST UNIVERSITY** all we could think of was finding our apartments and falling into our beds.

The next day we woke up in excitement about the whole experience ahead of us. The program for this day was optional; we had the chance to go to a Faith Community visit. I was in the group visiting a mosque and having a tour about Islam. After the tour was over they served special Islamic food, which was very delicious.



First week (July 2-6)

We started off with classes on Monday. We had **classes** on constitutions, communication and tensions and also documentary classes. My favorite was the constitution class; not only did we look at the American and compare it to our own but also created a new constitution. We discussed what is the difference between a vague and a very specific constitution, as well as looking at critical points of the American document. On the classes on communication and tension we learned how to handle



tensions between countries and how to communicate during meetings. We demonstrated this also through a play, when everyone presented a given imaginary country and we had to make agreements and through these solve the problems of the countries. Documentary class was mainly about learning of different media types and how media and even documentary films are biased as they represent a specific point of view.

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In the afternoons we had **various activities** we watched documentary films made by our mentors and we had two special dinners. On the 4th of July we had a picnic with American food and the day after we had the International dinner, when the fellows prepared their own traditional, national meals. I was also selected to make a Tarragon Chicken Soup. We enjoyed cooking together and trying all different kind of foods.

The first week was the one when everyone was trying to socialize as much as possible. We spent each moment getting to know each other and we were all surprised how similar we were still so different in. We all became friends quickly as we found the connecting points easily. Language barriers were not a problem for anyone. Another thing that surprised me was how the American fellows celebrated 4th of July. Every fellow was wearing either a shirt with the American flag or



white- blue and red cloths. For dinner we had also a cake in the colors of the flag. For me this was very surprising as I felt that in Hungary on the 15th of March people are only wearing a cockade if it is very necessary or have deep nationalist feelings. I felt that they were all proud to be American, to live in the great United States. I am not sure about other nations but I often feel that Hungarians are everything but proud to be Hungarians.

Second week (July 7-13)

We spent Saturday with **travelling** to **PHILADELPHIA**, to the largest city of Pennsylvania. We were kind of unfortunate as our bus broke down twice. We had to stop first after half an hour to fix the air-conditioning then after about 10 hours of travelling the bus broke down due to the heat, therefore we were travelling for 13 hours until we arrived to our destination. We had a little free time in the evening so we walked around to see a bit of the city. Next day we visited the Independence hall and



learned more about the Declaration of Independence. In our free time we also visited the Liberty Bell and walked a lot down-town. First I was impressed by the huge city with the huge buildings but by the end of our trip I realized I expected more. For me Philadelphia was dirty, stinky with few sights. I tried the famous Cheese steak it wasn't bad but filling and a bit too fatty.

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We continued our journey to **WASHINGTON, D.C.** on Monday. After our arrival we had some time to look around the city and see it lighted up. The next day was full of programs. We started at the Washington Center where we had the chance to discuss the issues in Syria and Afghanistan then visited the Holocaust museum. I found the **museum** very touching and the issue near to me. I found data about Hungary in several places and because it was interactive and films were shown I enjoyed it more. After this we walked from memorial to memorial. From the National Monument, to the World War II and Lincoln Memorial until the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. We spent more time at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial because we were discussing how appropriate it was and the reception of it. But one day was not enough for all the sights so next day after visiting the Newseum we went to the Capitol. On our last day in Washington we had a **simulation in the State Department**, where we had 4 current issues. 2 countries or organizations had talks and were trying to make an agreement. After the talks were over 1-1 representatives had to give a speech to the 'media' about the success of the talks. From this we learnt that when giving a public speech usually not the whole truth is told.



Third week (July 14-22)

After arriving back to **WINSTON-SALEM** we met our **host families**. I had a substitute family for the weekend as my original one was busy around the time. 4 of us were staying at loving family's home. It was great to have a look at a typical American family and we enjoyed the programs as well. We visited Old-Salem and Reynolda house together and went to the Crispy Cream Donuts festival, where we had our really first Crispy Cream Donut. On Monday I moved to my new family, to a nice, young couple but before meeting them we had a **debate class** and with the human rights group we visited the LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer) community of the university. We had the chance to meet people of the community. I felt that this meeting cleared many misunderstandings or beliefs about LGBTQ people and encouraged us to help them with coming out of the closet as it is more difficult in a society where the norm is to have a partner from different gender. During the week we had another class on social movements and in our groups on human rights in general and violations in our countries. We also had **community programs**, first we helped with ordering objects at Second Harvest then we did the same kind of job at Restore. At Second Harvest the objects were



given to people in need and because we put the similar objects in the same box it helped to find the thing one is looking for easier. Unfortunately at Restore we did not feel that we made any difference. Again we were ordering boxes for light switches. After the work was done it would get messy again in a second, also as there were 12 of us we could have done a bigger and maybe more important job for them. They were not prepared for us.

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Fourth week (July 23-27)

On the last few days we had **fewer classes and more programs together**. We moved back to the dorms to our roommates, who we already missed. On Monday a bunch of children came to Wake Forest University where we had to present them something about our country and culture. We tried to pick rather fun facts instead of data so they will remember and enjoy themselves. On Tuesday we had the Farewell dinner with all the host families. Everyone suited up and a lot of pictures were



made of us together. For most Europeans it was like a prom they will never have. The Art group performed their poems and drawings made about their impressions of the USA followed by volunteers performing something they were good at.

(<http://blogs.bftf.org/blog/2012/08/18/ben-franklin-in-poetry/>

You can find two of the poems here.) We really enjoyed each and every performance we were even surprised about some as we didn't know they were good in singing, dancing or writing. The high point of the evening was, when a video was shown in which every fellow's face was recorded.

(<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vCiUqZNSKKw>) It was

the first time we really felt that we will be leaving in two days and realized this program was a life changing event in

all of our lives. On our last day together we had **presentations of**

the workshops. Some gave speeches, had debates, others represented their videos or radio program. These evoked great and funny memories of our program. I gave a speech about human rights violations in Hungary. In this speech I chose our new constitution and gave examples such as discrimination against LGBTQ people, women and mentally disabled people. After this we spent the whole afternoon, evening and night staying awake in front of the dorms talking to each other, refreshing memories everything but remembering we will have to leave in a couple of hours. We were not flying back together because everyone had a different destination. This made saying goodbye even more difficult. We said goodbye to everyone, one by one, promising to stay in touch, to see each other again.

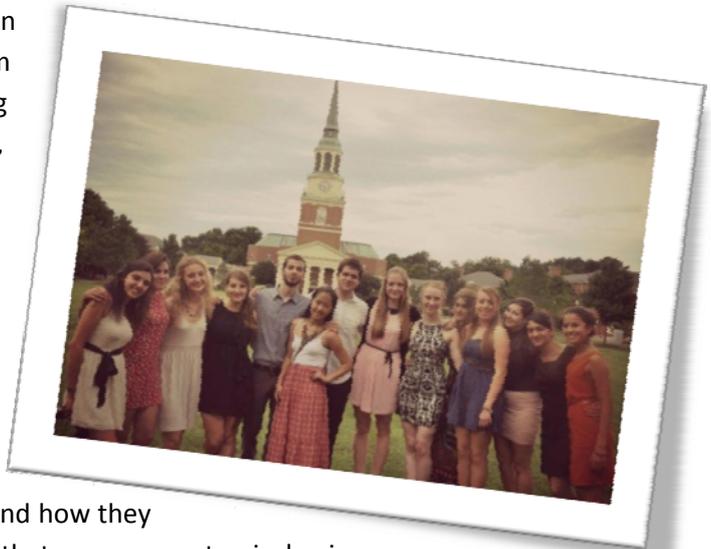
We all kept these promises our Facebook page is always full of pictures about reunions. I personally already met the Dutch fellow in Budapest, visited the Croatian fellow and had a reunion with our Moldavian mentor.

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Overall view

I started by saying this was my American dream. Yes, indeed it was. It was a dream came true for me and I felt I was dreaming while being there. The fellows were amazing, smart, well-informed and inquiring. Mentors and organizers were incredible, helpful and well-prepared. I learnt a lot during this month, not only what was told to us in lessons but also from the reaction of fellows, from our debates, the programs the chit-chats and everything. Even though I was the only Hungarian fellow I learnt a lot about my country, I realized why things are happening and how they



work. When I went to the USA I thought that every country is having problems mainly because of the economic crises but I had to realize even if a country has these kinds of issues it does not mean they have also other problems like Hungary does. It was strange for me to realize that issues in countries previously invaded by Russia have nowadays the same problems as we do. Corruption is a problem, there are only a few influential young politicians, unemployment is a big issue etc. But I also had the chance to look into countries like Luxembourg, which seems like Utopia to me. Children are educated, speaking at least 4 languages, unemployment rates are very low even has commuters from foreign countries, serious human rights violations just do not exist. People are satisfied and happy. One of the fellows from Luxembourg told me that “Hungary has the right to oppress its people”. What he said was mean but true and sad. All these things made me realize that our country needs young people like me to stay here and make a change. Hungary is making a huge mistake by scaring away its youth as they are not willing to sign a contract promising not to leave Hungary or just simply feel that for the money they have to pay for their higher education they can study at better, more prestigious university abroad. Despite this our country need us more than ever, to stay here to form groups and improve not only the reputation of Hungary but also economy, the living standards, the unemployment rate, wages and make people like their country. I realized I cannot leave my homeland just to have better education and/or higher wages abroad, where no one will understand when I say “the Hungarian Sea” or what this country really means for me.

This is why BFTF was a real life changing event for me. I want to stay in Hungary to make this change, to spread this knowledge among young people so they will know it's not worth leaving. No one will understand you better than someone from the same nationality.

Or one of your Best Friends Together Forever, who will never forget you and make plans to travel around Europe to visit everyone. ☺