

BADGERS BEYOND ABROAD

alumni interview series

Julia Byers

Germany

Life After Study Abroad

After studying abroad in Freiburg, Germany through IAP in 2007-2008, I graduated from the University of Wisconsin-Madison and had no idea what to do next. I moved back to my hometown Seattle for a few months and worked as a research assistant while trying to decide what I wanted to be when I grew up. I was thinking along the lines of counseling, teaching, or social work, but I just couldn't commit to any idea. Meanwhile, my college best friend had moved to Guatemala to work for a nonprofit organization in one of Guatemala City's more dangerous neighborhoods, right next to the largest Central American garbage dump. She said to me, "Julia, why don't you come down here on one of our two-week trips and see what you think?" I spent the next 10 months working in Guatemala City, living in Antigua, and falling in love with yet another experience. Since then I've graduated from Boston University with a Masters in Social Work, interned at Boston Medical Center with the Child Witness to Violence Project, and currently work full time as an Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Therapist in Seattle, Washington.

Impact on Life, Goals & Career

I just read through the most recent round of email updates from the four girls I met while studying abroad, who have become some of my closest college friends. We don't see each other very often (we're all across the country and one is still living abroad), but the year we spent in Germany is still present every day. Certain smells, flavors, or sounds remind me of working in the Irish pub around the corner from my apartment in Germany, or of the bakery on the top floor of the supermarket that was always full of soft pretzels. I still get Facebook messages from my German ex-boyfriend and happy birthday calls from my German roommates. I also remember feeling desperately homesick, wishing I could say what I meant in a foreign language without stumbling over a verb tense, and falling into bed at night exhausted by the constant newness of living abroad. Today, I work with families who have moved to the United States from a variety of backgrounds. While my privileged loneliness and fatigue while studying abroad is a far cry from the challenges these families face, I can connect with them on the daily struggle of not being able to communicate, of not knowing a new culture's implicit rules, and on the constant fatigue of newness.

Advice for Returning Students

It was hard to come back to Madison after feeling like an exotic creature for a year. People were always interested in where I came from, what I was doing in Germany, and how did I end up working in an Irish pub as an American college student. To lose that sense of specialness was devastating. The first few months back in Madison were lonely, but I couldn't blame it on not knowing the language or not having made friends yet. It took time (and lots of weekends spent forcing myself to get out of the house) before I remembered that while Germans were interested in my specialness of being different, they were also interested in regular me who just happened to be living in a foreign city.

Interview from December 2013



Julia and friends in Freiburg.

I lived with five Germans and one Swiss. Almost every memory I have of Germany involves at least one of those six characters, who made my year incredible.

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