Exchange Students: Advantages Of Studying Abroad

At one point in our lives we have heard the saying, “life is all about taking risks” and often paired with that quote is “do what makes you happy,” but sometimes the things that make us happy may not be what others want us to do. At 18 years old, Katherine Maynard decided that she wanted to take a purposeful gap year to Germany before starting a new chapter of her life at a university. (more intro stuff idk yet) Katherine learned not only about a new country and its culture, but about herself as an individual.

During Katherine’s junior year in high school, she received an email that was sent out to the entire school about merit-based programs that the students should look into and one of those programs were CBYX or Congress-Bundestag Youth Exchange. CBYX is a merit-based study abroad program that takes place in Germany and focuses on the federal parliament and foreign affairs. Katherine was looking toward going to university to get a degree in International Relations and she was in her third year of German at the time, so everything felt right with that program. The only problem was that her parents were against her choice of studying abroad; they believed that she should focus on going to college and travel the world later, but to Katherine, this was more than just traveling the world. To Katherine this study abroad trip would be a huge stepping stone to advance in her future career, so she convinced her parents by telling them all of the pros and cons. Although her parents were not too fond of the idea of her going across the world to a foreign country for a year, they realized how strongly she wanted to pursue this, so they caved and gave her permission. Knowing that this was going to be the start of a new chapter in her life, Katherine spent everyday working on her application up until a week before the deadline to make her application as close to perfection as possible.

Almost one year after the submission of Katherine’s application, she was boarding a plane that would land in Hannover, Germany. The second she walked off the plane and entered the airport, Katherine remembers feeling a “wave of nerves” run through her body, only know realizing what she got herself into. For about an hour, Katherine had to wait at the airport for her host family to arrive. During this time, all she could do was run through German phrases in her head of how she would introduce herself to her new family, imagine what her family would look like, and how living with them would be. The hour ran by fast and before she knew it, her program conductor called her name and she was escorted to her host family. Katherine says though their first encounter was awkward at first, on the ride to her new temporary home she quickly opened up to each other. The four of them were conversing in a slew of English and German words and hand gestures, basically using whatever would be able to get the message across. The first couple of months Katherine considered, “the honeymoon” stage because things were new and exciting and she had not faced any struggles yet. During this stage, everyone was still excited to see new people, students at her school were excited to have an American classmate, and Katherine was still blissfully enjoying the new scenery of Hameln.

Once the so called “honeymoon stage” ended, Katherine began to miss life back at home. Now that she wasn’t the “new kid” anymore, the students weren’t as enamoured by her and she had to do a lot of things herself. Learning to be strictly independent in a foreign country where the language is not your native one was very difficult for her. There would be times when she would have trouble getting to a destination and would have to ask nearby people for help;

sometimes this would be very easy, but other times Katherine said she felt embarrassed by taking too long to speak a sentence in German. Katherine said that she felt disconnected from her host family and the country itself which resulted in her being very uncomfortable for a period of time. One time during a Math lecture, Katherine said she broke out in unexplainable tears and when the teacher came to console her, she had now words to explain exactly why she was crying. After that outburst however, she said that she became more relaxed and that the tears were most likely from built up stress and pressure to adapt. Luckily, there were other American exchange students on the program that lived in nearby towns. Once Katherine began venturing out to see her American friends and got familiar with the train system, things became better for her. Some of her American friends were more connected to the German culture so it was easier for them to make friends with the students at their school, which soon became Katherine's friends too. Studying abroad changed Katherine drastically from being a reserved person to being more open to stepping out of her comfort zone because she learned that doing something uncomfortable can lead to becoming comfortable and in a better position in one's life.

Although Katherine experienced some difficult challenges of self growth and finding her own independence, the struggles that she faced made her a more well rounded individual in society. From learning about a new culture and living the life of a German citizen, Katherine now has the ability to understand how people think and understand their reasoning. Overall, studying abroad with the CBYX program or any other exchange program is something Katherine strongly recommends try. Katherine states that studying abroad is a “moment in your life that can influence you for a lifetime,” and she would not change a thing about her experience studying in Germany.