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Institut Tübingen

German-American  
Institute Tübingen

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Tuebingen, October 11, 2019

## **“Ambassadors in Sneakers 2019 – A Young Leaders’ Transatlantic Summer Academy on Human Rights”**

“Ambassadors in Sneakers 2019” brought together twelve American students (from Michigan and Illinois) and twelve German students (from Saxony and Baden-Wuerttemberg), ages 16-21, for an intensive four-week program on human rights. The first part of the academy took place in Leipzig and Berlin from June 15 - June 29, 2019. The return trip led the students to Ann Arbor, MI, and Chicago, IL, from July 27 - August 10, 2019. During the trips, students met activists, politicians, businesspeople and cultural leaders from both countries and visited many places and institutions that are significant for the development and support of human rights.

The program in **Leipzig** included a talk by human rights expert Prof. Dr. Paul Rundquist, organized in cooperation with the American Space Leipzig, an extensive intercultural workshop, and a day trip to the historic German city of Weimar for the opening of the Goethe-Institut’s second international Kultursymposium. At a youth council fair, the students presented the youth leadership committees of their home communities to each other. They met Inge Bell, women’s rights activist and vice president of Terre des Femmes, as well as members of the local youth council JUPA Leipzig, and, at the U.S. Consulate General, Consul Emily Norris. A focus was set on human rights issues in the GDR with visits to both Museum in der Runden Ecke and Zeitgeschichtliches Forum.

In **Berlin**, the students met member of the Bundestag Nils Schmid, activist duo Herr & Speer, and Dorothea Herlemann, managing director of the organization Medizin Hilft e.V., where skilled medical personnel volunteer to treat people without health insurance. Further highlights included visits to international broadcaster Deutsche Welle and the U.S. Embassy in Berlin, where the students met both U.S. Embassy Cultural Affairs Attache David Mees and Jake Nelson, a diplomat focusing on human rights issues. Students also discussed the role of the Holocaust in Germany’s past and how to best combat antisemitism today during visits to the Jewish Museum and the memorial site at the former Nazi concentration camp Sachsenhausen.

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When the Ambassadors in Sneakers met again in Tuebingen's sister city **Ann Arbor, MI**, they talked to diversity and inclusion adviser Angela Thompkins, to Roz Schindler, the daughter of a Holocaust survivor, and to U.S. District Judge Judith Ellen Levy, who provided a legal perspective on a broad range of human rights issues, from immigration to the Flint water crisis. The students also met Zaynab Elkolaly, Washtenaw County's Young Citizen of the Year at the youth center "The Neutral Zone", and talked to four prominent local climate change activists. A day trip to Detroit included a meeting with Andrew Bemish, Honorary Consul of the Federal Republic of Germany, a guided tour through the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History, and a visit to the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit.

A focus of this year's program was set on issues of sexual identity and discrimination. In **Chicago**, the group visited the Test Positive Aware Network and the Center on Halstead in Boystown, the oldest officially recognized gay neighbourhood in the U.S. These meetings were met with particular interest from the group, of which several self-identified as members of the LGBTQ+ community. The students visited the Headquarters of Rotary International as well as the Goethe Institut Chicago, where they met Casimiro de Jesús Peña, community organizer at the Obama Foundation.

As of today, the program participants are still actively involved in their local youth councils or other community leadership programs. They have returned from our academy with new insight and inspiration, but also with a better understanding of their own responsibility as global citizens and young leaders. As a result, they are determined to facilitate positive change in their own communities and, in many ways, have already started to do so.

Aside from its profound impact on the young leaders who participate, on their youth councils, and on many of the people they encountered, Ambassadors in Sneakers 2019 created many new connections among the German-American Institute Tuebingen and its program partners, including the American Space Leipzig, the U.S. Consulate General Leipzig, the U.S. Embassy Berlin, the Goethe-Institut Chicago, the Obama Foundation, as well as a large number of organizations and guest speakers. In particular, it was our goal to stimulate and rejuvenate the sister city relationship between Tuebingen and Ann Arbor. We are hoping that, beyond the context of this program, these new connections will prove fruitful for everyone involved.

It is also noteworthy that, in 2019, "Ambassadors in Sneakers" was part of the Deutschlandjahr "Wunderbar together", an initiative by the German Federal Foreign Office and the Goethe-Institut to

showcase and improve the German-American relations. This year marked the final academy within the three-year funding period initially granted by our main sponsor, the Transatlantic Program of the Federal Republic of Germany.

Due to the great results of our first three academies, we are happy that the German government has decided to extend their sponsorship by another two years. This means that there will be another transatlantic summer academy on human rights in both 2020 and 2021. Since the subsidy amount was reduced, though, fundraising for third-party support will continue to stay one of the biggest challenges for us in the future. If you would like to support Ambassadors in Sneakers in 2020 or point us towards potential sponsors, please don't hesitate to get in touch with us.

Regardless of future challenges, we are deeply grateful for the role that many great people played in supporting young leaders from both sides of the Atlantic and strengthening German-American relations through our program. In addition to all sponsors and program partners, we would particularly like to thank Yvonne Stevens, director of the German School Ann Arbor, who acted as our U.S. program coordinator, as well as fellow American program chaperones Silvia Rieder, Michele Ryan and Necko Fanning.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading 'Ute Bechdorf'.

Dr. Ute Bechdorf  
Director  
German-American Institute Tuebingen

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading 'Felix Weinmann'.

Felix Weinmann  
Project Coordinator Ambassadors in Sneakers  
German-American Institute Tuebingen

Pictures:



*U.S. Embassy, Berlin*



*Auswärtiges Amt, Berlin*



*Volunteering at the Food Gatherers, Ann Arbor*



*Weimar*





*Obama Foundation and Goethe-Institut, Chicago*

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