

Derek Price – Germany 2012-2013  
Lumos Award Final Report

*From October 5<sup>th</sup>, 2012 to June 26<sup>th</sup>, 2013, Belmont graduate and Lumos Student Travel Award recipient Derek Price carried out a volunteer English-teaching project in Enkenbach-Alsenborn, Germany. He experienced a wide spectrum of German culture first-hand by living with a German-speaking host family and later relocating to a more urban setting in Karlsruhe, Germany. He worked to improve the English writing, reading, speaking, and listening skills of students in grades 9-13 at a regional “Gesamtschule,” or High School, and also improved his own German skills through intensive, semester-long language classes and University-level lecture courses at the nearby Karlsruhe Institut für Technologie (KIT).*

It was January of 2012 when I first heard about the Lumos Student Travel Award. I was at a party, discussing post-graduation plans with a friend of mine who was planning to travel to Spain and teach English for a year. I told him how I had already considered doing something similar, but had barely missed the deadlines for application. Later that night, he rushed back to me and breathlessly told me about the Lumos Award, which he had investigated earlier but had completely forgotten about until his girlfriend reminded him of it. They gave me the Lumos website, and the next morning I checked it out. When I saw that the deadlines were still manageable, and that they were willing to fund a variety of projects, I decided I would dedicate my free time to finding a way to travel abroad with Lumos.

Since I had studied Philosophy and minored in German, the first thing I used to narrow my search was to look for opportunities in German-speaking countries, namely Switzerland, Austria, and Germany. During the early phase of my research, I realized just how hard it is to find *any*, let alone Lumos-appropriate, volunteer opportunities in German-speaking countries. Since these countries are fairly affluent and have good education systems and social programs, there is less need for volunteers from overseas. However, after much searching, I finally found Experiential Learning International (ELI), a company that offered focused volunteer, internship, and work-study programs in a variety of countries, including Germany. After establishing contact with them and learning more about options for their Germany program, I chose to plan my project around their English-teaching volunteer program, where I hoped to spend 9 months living with a host family and assisting at a local high school. While that was longer than they normally offered, I really wanted to immerse myself in Germany’s language and culture, and I thought that 9 months would give me more time to acquire valuable teaching experience, make a deeper impact on the local community, and significantly improve my German.



Enkenbach-Alsenborn in the Spring

After meeting with the Lumos committee and revising a few things, my project was approved. I was heading to Enkenbach-Alsenborn, Germany, starting in October through the end of the German school year in June to teach English at the Integrierte Gesamtschule Enkenbach-Alsenborn (IGS for short), where I would assist the English department in any way I could to help improve the students' English skills. Enkenbach-Alsenborn was a small town in Rheinland-Pfalz, a southwestern German state, filled with natural beauty. I was excited at the prospect of exploring life in rural

Germany as a contrast to my month-long stay in Berlin two summers prior. I was also able to find a language course, with the assistance of my in-country coordinator, at Karlsruhe Institut für Technologie (KIT), a University in the neighboring state of Baden-Württemberg, as a supplement to my daily German practice with my host family.

When I arrived in Enkenbach-Alsenborn, my host family surprised me with a trip to Europa Park and Paris. I almost felt guilty beginning my trip with vacation, but the trip to Paris allowed me to meet my in-country coordinator in person, and the trip helped me and my host family start off on the right foot. When I returned to Enkenbach-Alsenborn, I immediately began work at the IGS. Apparently, the school had 2 previous Language Assistants that had not worked out too well. The first stayed for a month and barely got settled before he had to leave, and the second showed up to teach twice, never said a word to any of the faculty, and then proceeded to spend his last few weeks traveling. Since they had never had a real Language Assistant, my job was very, very open-ended. After a faculty meeting, I was approached by five or six different teachers who were interested in my help in the classroom. My responsibilities varied from class to class, but mostly I lead three or four small, 10 minute discussion groups with a few students, who would rotate out each class period. I was responsible for providing all materials and ideas for these small discussion groups, and it took me a month or two until I had figured out how to prepare for and run my discussion groups. While the teachers occasionally provided me with material to use, I was free to choose whatever I felt would be helpful and appropriate for the students. Mostly I worked with older students in grades 9-13 who already had very good English skills, but occasionally I was asked to tutor younger students that were struggling, or do a special activity with a lower-level class. I did everything from practicing the alphabet



The Integrierte Gesamtschule Enkenbach-Alsenborn, where I taught

with 5<sup>th</sup> graders, to holding mock-job interviews with 12<sup>th</sup> graders.

From October until January, my schedule was pretty much the same every week: work at the school for three days with 2-3 classes per day, and travel to University on the other two days for my language course. I had plenty of opportunities to practice German, since my host family insisted that we speak German all the time. While difficult and frustrating at first, I found that after the first two months I knew how to communicate all the necessary things and I was gaining confidence in my German. And things at the school settled into a rhythm as well. Since the biggest thing I had to offer the school and the students was my native but also refined feel for English, the teachers asked me to speak only in English with the students. Far from being confused and afraid of conversing with a native speaker, I found that the majority of students were excited to practice (or in some cases show-off) their English skills with me. After the anxiety of teaching wore off, I even began to look forward to working with the students, because they were such enthusiastic conversation partners. They spoke with an intensity and an intentionality that I began to recognize as something one has only while speaking a foreign



Winter at its best in Enkenbach-Alsenborn

weather. In the Rheinland-Pfalz region, and generally all over Germany, the weather can be pretty miserable through the fall and winter, and those seasons feel like they last forever. Cold, dark, cloudy, rainy, and snowy are all words that come quickly to mind. Although there were a few beautiful snowy days, it was more often slushy or icy outside, which made the weather more annoying and inconvenient than beautiful. In addition to the atmospheric dreariness, I too was in a bit of dreary mood. By December and January I was feeling a bit isolated. While Enkenbach-Alsenborn offered a lot in the way of nature and hiking-trails, it offered very little in terms of socializing. There were two restaurants and a bar nearby, but it was nearly impossible to meet people there, or anywhere else in town for that matter. The only regular social event that I attended was a Friday night choir rehearsal that my host mother had invited me to attend during my first month, and which I later found myself *obligated* to attend. There is only so much fun that can be had with Germans who are all older than 60, speaking in a regional dialect

language. It was like you could see them planning what they were going to say a split second before they said it. Working with the students not only taught me about teaching, but about how people learn to speak a second language. It was not the first time, nor the last, when I learned something from people that I was supposed to be teaching.

As my project continued into the new year and I was becoming comfortable at the school, certain things in my personal and home life, which had hardly bothered me before, were becoming bigger problems. One was completely out of my hands: the



that I cannot understand, singing songs I had never heard before, or (bad) translations to German of old American pop and showtunes. Though I made some friends in Karlsruhe through my language course, I could only see them twice a week, during the week. Add to that some growing tensions with my host family, and by the beginning of February I was ready for a change.

At the suggestion of one of my teachers at the IGS, I started looking for apartments in Karlsruhe. I figured it would be a good city to move to since I was taking my language course there and I already knew the city and few people in it pretty well. By mid-February, I had found a few useful websites, and felt ready to go apartment hunting. Fortunately, when I proposed the idea to ELI and my host family, both were very understanding and helpful. They wanted me to have good memories of my time in Germany, and if I felt that I needed to move out on my own, then they were willing to support me in my decision, most importantly in the financial sense. After 2 weeks of e-mailing and interviewing (in German!) I found a great apartment in a very nice area in Karlsruhe with an Indian man who spoke fluent German and English. I signed the lease through to the end of June, packed up my things, and moved by train to Karlsruhe.

The move was just the right thing at just the right time. Personally, I was ready and able to handle things on my own in German, and at the school things were about to change. My 13<sup>th</sup> graders were taking their Abitur, or finishing exam, after which they were done with High School. After they were finished, the IGS was going to change the class schedule, which allowed me to rearrange my teaching days in a way that made the commute from Karlsruhe to the IGS possible without missing any of my existing teaching commitments. The



Having dinner with my friends in Karlsruhe

move also allowed me to engage University life a bit more, as I was able to attend a few lectures throughout the summer semester, which I used primarily as listening and comprehension practice, and to meet other students and people my age. I ended up attending the Summer Semester's Orientation week and met a lot of students from all over the world through KIT's Erasmus program. Although the *lingua franca* of the Erasmus students was almost always English, I still had plenty of opportunities to practice my spoken German with certain groups of people (the eastern Europeans were quite good at German, for some reason), and I finally had a chance to travel around and have a bit of fun.

When I look back on it now, I can't imagine the project having gone any better. The first five months were tough, but I learned a lot about teaching and German during those months that set me up for success during the final 4 months. The experience of moving out and living on my own in Germany was liberating and valuable because it removed barriers to German culture that I hadn't even known had existed before I moved out. Suddenly, there was no buffer between me

and the German people; if I needed some help or information from someone, I had to contact them myself and get it. Whether it was just asking about different types of meat at the butcher counter in the grocery store, or trying to figure out online-enrollment for my language course, I was responsible for figuring out how to do it. Moving out on my own brought me face-to-face with all the daily necessities of living in a foreign country, and that in turn made me even more self-reliant.



A farewell breakfast with my 11<sup>th</sup> graders at the IGS

In a way, the whole project was a lesson in adapting to new circumstances, and learning how to be independent. Whether it was in the classroom teaching, taking notes and google-translating during a lecture, or just hanging out with a group of German-speakers, I continuously found myself in new situations, faced with new challenges. I think one of the most important aspects of my project was that it forced me to become a good problem-solver, both in my work and in my personal life. If there was something I didn't like, or something that could be done better, it was up to me to come up with a solution to fit the problem. That's the real value of living abroad, and Lumos serves a valuable purpose in making life-changing projects possible. By putting students face-to-face with a foreign country, language, and people, Lumos challenges its travelers to put problem-solving skills into practice in the real world, and find solutions to solve their own problems, and to help others. Working with the students at the school taught me a lot about being a teacher and learning languages, but more importantly it showed me how just a little bit of care and attention can make a big difference in the long-term. I discovered that the work of teaching is the kind of work that progresses by inches, slowly, step-by-step, and not by great leaps and bounds. Every week I made a little progress with my students, and though it may not have felt like much in the short-term, the true goal of teaching is to improve students in the long-term. I hope that Lumos continues to provide opportunities to students that allow them to grow as I have grown and to make real and lasting differences in the communities they visit, no matter how small or big.