

AFS INTERCULTURAL PROGRAMS GERMANY-VENEZUELA

My name is Mardon, I come from a rural village called El Tesoro, in Venezuela. Being an AFS volunteer changed the way I saw the world. I got the opportunity to go to Germany through a scholarship for underprivileged youth. With 25 years of age, I got to live and work in Hamburg for one year in 2011. I had just graduated from college in Caracas and wanted to experience something completely new. In Venezuela I had participated in voluntary services in rural villages where the people live in extreme poverty. I liked meeting these wonderful people becoming aware about the different social contexts in my country.

The arrival

The whole trip seemed unreal. I've never been in such a long flight in my life. I was with other 5 Venezuelan friends from AFS. We arrived in Frankfurt. My feet were on the ground, but my head was in the cloud and going round and round like a windmill. It was autumn and it was a bit cold, the wind was different, the people were different, my life was starting to change. Two AFS-volunteers were waiting for us, and helped us with our luggage. I could speak a bit of English but I knew nothing about German, therefore I just nervously laughed. We all got on the train and as we were on our way to Hamburg, I thought of my parents, sisters, Caracas, my village "el Tesoro". I started to miss everything and everyone that I've left behind.

In our apartment we met with the AFS coordinator and talked about the project and logistics. Our dinner consisted of pork chops with a fried egg on top, steamed potatoes, pumpernickel bread, apple juice, coffee and pretzels. I felt the jet lag, I was slightly confused and disoriented. So I decided to sleep, tomorrow would be a new day in Germany.



The language

For all Latinamericans, living in Germany is a big cultural challenge. The main problem was obviously the language. Learning the language quickly is what the volunteer should focus at the beginning, they should have a real desire to learn and get better.

I liked living on my own and it was a great life experience. Since then, I think an AFS volunteer should be always ready to really make the most out of any situation; his success will depend on his outlook on life and his stand on difficult situations. AFS goal is to empower young people, so they are capable of taking action on social, political, economic or cultural grounds, improving the world and make it more humane.

TV helped me a lot with the language, but I wanted to get better faster and music was there for me. Peter Fox was especially cool, I really like his songs, so I printed the lyrics out and learnt it. At

work I could use some of these words in the conversation that I had with the students. What a nice surprise! I was starting to really understand German.

Getting used to Germany

In regards to the cultural context, I must say that from day one I felt very comfortable in this new country. I loved the small things like not having to run to across the street (that was something completely new, because in Caracas you really have to be an athlete). It was hard for me to be on time, but I managed to be punctual and it's something that I still do here in Venezuela. The feeling of wellbeing and security was mind blowing in regard of the high rates of violence in Caracas. Germans are very detail oriented, organized and punctual. They are fun and open to other cultures, it's a society where there's a deep sense of respect for religious beliefs, moral values and liberty.



In my third month here I was a bit down, but I talked about it and realized it's normal to feel this way. After this conversation I felt much better. It's important to understand why we have this "down" and how can we overcome it. I started writing a novel it's titled *An unconventional man* and it's based on my own experience with AFS.

My job

I did my volunteer service in a school, the Erich Kästner Gesamtschule. It is one of the best professional experiences that I've had up to date. The students were incredible. I'm forever grateful to one of these very disciplined and committed teachers. I meet a lot of students that treated me super nice because they knew I came from South America and I have to admit that my tanned skin attracted attention, so I sometimes felt like a movie star. The kids knew I was a foreigner, so they talked extra slow so I would understand and learn new words. Thanks to them I learnt many words.

I liked that the schedule was flexible, I could pick to which classes I wanted to go in. The food was delicious, I had no problem with cafeteria food and even got to hang out and joke with the cooks and other personal. It was great to build social ties.

Family and friends

In this sort of programs, one will meet amazing people and make friends for life. An important person for me was Mona, AFS volunteer and host mom to a girl from Costa Rica (Diana). I met Mona when Diana invited me over to her house to eat. She welcomed me in German and in Spanish. I told her about Venezuela, she talked about Germany. After that, we became friends and she was a big help to me to stay motivated and keep strong. Thanks to her and the staff of AFS Germany and Venezuela I had a wonderful experience.



There was another person who was really important and made my experience amazing. My great friend Stella, she was my AFS mentor. She was younger than me, but we got along great. She

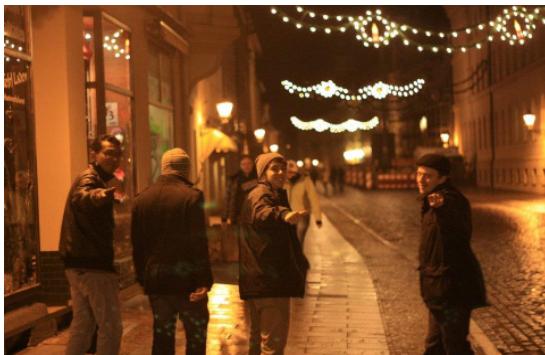
taught me to dance salsa! I got to meet her mother and dog. I understood that in Germany, when you make a friend, it's forever.

The message

Right there is where I discovered how valuable AFS's goal is, the aim to raise people's awareness to others and to other situations of life and make them want to participate and be part of a change. The work experience made me realize how important my job was, it was up to the teacher - and me - that all students felt comfortable there, so they could learn and grow. AFS made me view everything in a different light, which helped me grow as a person and understand that leaders should care for all people (no exceptions), like Nietzsche said they should be free, confident of themselves, with values and the will to live life to the fullest.

German Winter

I also realized that I was very much alone, as were the other AFS participants; and in winter one can feel it more. When one experiences winter alone for the first time, even more as Latin American, it's certainly a challenge. During winter four o'clock was already night time. Snow is not like in the movies, sometimes it gets in your shoes and you can feel your feet freezing. The wind burns your face, even if you're dressed like an astronaut. You don't want to go outside or go to work. You start to think about your family and friends. In winter I was tired of eating potatoes, bread and apples. I miss Venezuelan food. I was tired of hearing German. I didn't want to read or write. I started to be grumpy all the time.



But there are good things about winter as well, like: drinking Glühwein [this is a heated wine with spices that people drink during the Christmas season]. What really helped me out of my trouble was exercise and sports. I could be happy again and in the end winter was a great time, where I learned more about life and myself.

Living an AFS experience is breaking free from your own fears. Experiencing winter in Germany means you can overcome anything else that life puts in your way. Winter made me more responsible, stronger, gave me time to meditate about life and what I wanted to accomplish. The AFS volunteer should set goals for himself and do everything to reach them.

Today

2014. I'm back in Venezuela. AFS changed my life forever. I learned how to be an intercultural leader. That's the reason why now I'm running a foundation for social development called "Fundación Cultural Mariano Arismendi". With that experience, AFS let me organize and put meaning in my life that's why I want to keep living new experiences that will broaden my horizons.

I want to thank AFS Venezuela and AFS Germany for the opportunity they gave me, and the impulse to be a better person and help my community. Thank you from the bottom of my heart.