

College Application Essay for Admittance to a BA Program at the University of Maryland  
By: Jonathan Gast

Disoriented, shocked, and tired - these were my feelings the morning after coming home from a year in Germany. It seemed everyone had a cell-phone, was drinking some new type of Pepsi, and driving around town with American flags stuck on their bumpers. Several friends stopped by to say hi, but what I had expected to be a warm, friendly, and intellectual conversation became no more than blank stares and a cold "see you later." Was it something I said? A year ago we would have been standing in a circle laughing about good times, and here I was trying to elicit a reaction from them concerning American foreign affairs. All I received was a look of bewilderment. I felt like my home was no longer familiar to me; it was as if I had been sleeping or gone for a very long time. America had changed, my friends were no longer the same, and I was beginning to see that perhaps I was different as well. I suddenly understood what it must have been like for Rip Van Winkle to have woken up to a familiar yet changed world. As a freshman, I would not even have considered being where I am today.

As a Freshman I was also disoriented and shocked, but I was much more willing to accept my new high school environment. I was unsure about my potential or what I wanted to make of myself. I was a small freshman just beginning the maze of high school, but this is where my path started, and I had not the slightest clue where to go. My only concept of identity was based on my affiliations. I was a boy scout, a drummer, and a computer nerd. Even though I was trying to find out who I was, I was always distracted by friends, family, and other familiar peers. My freshman and sophomore years were spent idly conforming to a group of friends. I wasted two years before figuring out that my path in life would not be determined by a group of high school buddies. My metamorphosis truly began my junior year.

One night at the end of tenth grade, I was looking at electives to select for my junior year. My grades in Spanish were humiliating. I never had the desire to learn Spanish. I sat there cursing the school system for allowing German class to conflict with band. I wanted to continue marching band, but I knew that my grades in Spanish would only go downhill. Until that point, I was too concerned with taking the classes that I was supposed to take, rather than taking the classes that actually interested me. I held my breath and circled first year German. I would just have to sacrifice marching band that year, and although I knew that taking first year German as a junior would not look great on my transcript, I had peace of mind knowing I would finally learn a language I enjoyed. My first week of school that year was different than other years; by the end of the first week I built up enough confidence to ask the German teacher to let me move at a faster pace. I was not concerned with my grade in the class, as my only true motive was to thoroughly learn German. As every week progressed I completed a chapter in my German book, and soon I had finished all the work for a normal first year German student. A door then opened for me. My German teacher asked me if I had ever considered becoming an exchange student. The thought was exciting, but I had never heard of an American becoming an exchange student. This did not seem normal. She told me that I would be a good candidate for the Congress-Bundestag youth exchange scholarship. I drove home with a smile on my face,

and proudly explained to my parents that I was going to apply. I expected them to be equally as enthusiastic, but I found that they were more concerned with good grades than for me to apply for some silly Germany exchange scholarship. Regardless, I decided to trust myself again, because the last decision I had made on my own had been a good one. I applied for the scholarship, and made it to semifinals. My parents' newfound support for the idea no longer mattered, because I knew I was doing this for myself and not for others. Receiving the acceptance letter was the most gratifying moment in my life up until that point. I continued pursuing my goals in German class. By the time I arrived in Germany, I was confronted with the reality that no amount of high school level German would prepare me to comfortably converse with native speakers. My knowledge of the language was limited to just the basics.

My host family was not at all what I expected, but I wanted to keep an open mind. I was not prepared to become the target of questions concerning America. I thought I was there to learn about them, but I soon found the motive my family had for taking me in was different. Not only did my host mom want me to learn about German culture, but she also wanted to use me in order to learn about America. It was difficult to answer complicated questions about American international affairs when the most complex thing I could say was, "I am hungry." My host brother was particularly anti-American, and I was often the target for his hatred. Among all these problems, I was having trouble making friends. My entire class was made up of 15 teenagers that lived scattered around a rural area, and none of them had any common interests with me. At the same time I was having an identity crisis. No longer surrounded by familiar peers, I found that I was stripped of my former identity. Could it be that my identity until then was just a reflection of my parents and friends? This was a nightmare. I realized that having German friends was an essential part of understanding the German culture, but I was only beginning to see that friends would not be the determining factor in defining who I was. I wanted to put direction in my life and make something of myself. I had to act, and I made the decision to find a German Boy Scout troop and join it. After stumbling through several telephone conversations with Boy Scout leaders, I was informed that I was too old to join their troop. Since that did not work out, I thought that maybe I could still develop a friendship with someone in my class, but I soon found that Germans do not have the same sense for friendship that an American does. In America, you could refer to a classmate as a friend. By German terms this is laughable and would be considered insulting. In Germany, a friendship needs to be based on more than just circumstance. My host mom suggested I go on a ski trip with a youth group. Following Christmas I went to the Austrian Alps with a group of teenagers. I instantly paired up with a guy who made electronic music like I did. We had a great week together, but I found out that we lived too far apart to build a lasting friendship. Feeling frustrated, I asked my host mom for advice; for the first time, we considered the idea of changing host families. I did not want to admit she was right, because for me it would have been the same as giving up. I was very fond of my current host family, but I eventually saw that switching host families was necessary in order to remedy the problem. It was hard to switch host families, but the feelings of acceptance and warmth that my new host family greeted me with, allowed me to make a positive transition with no difficulty at all.

Switching host families paid off. Not only was my host family great, but I was

quickly making friends in my new surroundings. I was finally learning what it was like to be a German teenager, however, my identity crisis had not yet fled me. I felt awkward and strange at times while hanging out with my German buddies. I had the same feeling of idleness and conformity that plagued me during my freshman and sophomore years. Being independent and making decisions for myself seemed to work out for me, so I made yet another decision. I began to seek out new activities that I would enjoy. Dancing was one of those things that seemed taboo for a male American teenager, but here was my opportunity to learn to dance without fear of embarrassing myself. In addition to dancing, I wanted to get involved with music somehow in Germany. I went to the music store and bought a couple compositions by Schubert. My family enjoyed the music, and encouraged me to continue playing. I further developed my love for music by going to the symphony in Aachen. The orchestra was enchanting, and watching the conductor made me dream of directing a symphony orchestra of my own one day. After this experience I spent hours in the music store listening to as many different classical compositions as possible. Aachen was not only home to the symphony hall that I frequented, but it was also the home to a college campus. A college activity guide stated that there were free lectures on foreign affairs and terrorism held by professors from other universities throughout Germany. After going to several of these lectures, I became energized and tried to learn as much as possible about Europe and the German government. As the end of the year drew near, I was given an opportunity to influence politics on an international level. I was chosen to give a speech to a committee of the German Parliament at the Reichstag in Berlin. This was my opportunity to pledge support for the exchange program and reflect upon my personal development during the year. Giving the speech was a climatic end to my time in Germany. Several weeks later, I returned to the United States.

Just as I encountered culture shock coming to Germany, I experienced culture shock coming back home. My life had changed dramatically, and the differences between myself and my friends were apparent. I was now accustomed to being independent and making decisions for myself. I discovered things about myself that would never have occurred to me had I not spent that year away from home. I was more sensitive to people's feelings, and truly understood what friendship meant. I developed a love for classical music, dancing and international politics. The most important thing I brought home with me was a sense of identity. I am no longer a mere reflection of my parents and friends. Identity and self-assurance are now things I will always carry with me.