

Experiencing America beyond Hollywood

The U.S. Embassy in Berlin introduces the Windows on America program to German-Muslim high school students. Every year the program invites up to 100 young Muslims to the United States

The red-brick entrance to the Ernst-Abbe high school in Berlin's oft-maligned Neuköln district could be that of any high school in America. Students roughhouse and tease each other on their lunch break, spreading jovially onto the sidewalk – not at all the sinister scene of immigrant tensions and violence that German media tends to highlight, though 82 percent of the students here have what is popularly called "immigration background."

Four students, Mariam, Serhat, Ümit, and Akin sit bashfully in an empty classroom, sacrificing their break to discuss a 10-day trip they took to the United States last October. They were among ten students selected by essay competition to be accompanied by two of their teachers on tours of New York City and Washington D.C., visit schools, and stay with host families in Des Moines, Iowa.

"I wanted to go because America was a big chance and I could never go alone," explains Mariam, 17, whose parents are from Russia and Azerbaijan. "Before, my stereotypes were good and bad, but I learned that a lot of Americans are open-minded." Ümit, 19, who immigrated to Germany from Turkey age three, agrees, "They asked a lot of questions and were curious. Germany is a little different."

Since June 2006, three such groups of German high school students, including those from Ernst-Abbe high school, have travelled to America as part of this new educational program, Windows on America, administered by the U.S. mission to Germany. While student exchange between the U.S. and Germany is commonplace, this program singles out youth with immigration background – specifically Muslims.

Sitting comfortably upstairs in his Berlin office, U.S. Ambassador William R. Timken, who initiated Windows on America with his wife, Sue Timken, explains why the program is focused toward these students. While some might say a program aimed at a specific religious group is discriminatory, Timken says Windows on America actually addresses an institutionalized exclusion of such students in Germany. "The State Department administers a number of exchange programs, but these make up a proportion of more elite functions and people," he says. "Below a certain level, especially the way the system works in Germany ... these kids are just not a part of normal exchange programs ... Windows on America came about as a public-private partnership to address this issue."

Timken agrees that if Americans consider German demographics at all, it's likely that Muslims aren't the first group that comes to mind. But according to the German Federal Statistical Office, of the country's 82.5 million inhabitants, 3.3 million are Muslims. Despite the numbers, many Germans arguably haven't included residents with immigration background in their vision of German society until the last few years, either, until events across Europe, like the 2005 civil unrest in Paris, began highlighting difficulties in Muslim integration.

In fact, Timken's arrival to Germany in August 2005 was followed by two major new events in the country's attempt to address these issues – the Integration Summit in July 2006, and the German Conference on Islam in September of the same year. This shifting climate in German immigration and integration attitudes paired with the U.S. mission's post-9/11 orders from the White House to engage in Muslim outreach motivated Timken to explore ways the Embassy could foster intercultural dialogue at a grassroots level.

Ambassador Timken and his wife began hosting meals and dialogues with Muslim leaders and students. "In the process, we found there was a great receptivity from Muslims and the immigrant community," Timken says. There is a difference between the American and German styles of addressing community issues, he explains. "This is a cultural thing. Germans and Europeans tend to rely on government to intellectually address problems ... but America has a tradition of tackling things on a person to person basis."

From discussions they had with students during these events, the Timkens were inspired to create Windows

on America, which ultimately aims to give students – who have likely been the target of stereotypes themselves – a chance to confront their own preconceptions about the U.S. through personal contact with American students and families, as well as exposure to American culture.


Timken hopes to improve opinions of the U.S. for students with immigrant backgrounds. Their opinions are often skewed by pop-culture and media, he says. "Categorically, the view is of an aggressive society which isn't truly appreciative of world diversity, and that all Americans are as seen in Hollywood movies."

Because there is no built-in funding for the program, it operates as a public-private partnership, funded largely through corporate donations from companies like Citibank Deutschland and Delta Airlines. Timken notes that raising funds for the Windows on America has been the greatest challenge, but that interest is growing after three successful trips. So far, the program has received more than 250,000 dollars in donations.

The program plans to invite up to 100 young Muslims to the United States each year. The next group of students to go to America will be all girls from Frankfurt, many of whom Timken says wear headscarves. He says the program wanted to involve more conservative young Muslim women in the program. After consulting with mosques in Frankfurt for three months, the embassy arranged a Windows on America trip to Boston, which will include two female Muslim chaperones and carefully chosen Muslim host families. The Ambassador seems particularly excited about the next trip, saying, "It's our most unique group yet."

As for the Embassy's potential influence on German immigrant outreach styles, the Ambassador remains diplomatic. Between the two governments, he says, "It's not the same objectives, but we find we're on the same path."

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