

Almost a Month in the Land of Stars and Stripes

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Landing at Newark international airport and seeing the skyline of Manhattan behind the little airplane window into which you have to so uncomfortably lean in order to see the land beneath I was unable to stop a question from repeatedly coming up in my head: "What did I do to deserve this?" In front of me were three weeks of the Center for Talented Youth at Princeton – probably the best summer education a high school student can get. There were many other people applying for the view I was just enjoying and I still could not believe I was lucky enough to make it all the way here.

I applied on a dare, the night before the application deadline I had a hard time deciding whether I should finish my application or spend a night out with friends, thinking the odds of being selected were not in my favor. I have put future gain in front of immediate pleasure and it was one of the best small, seemingly meaningless decisions I have made this year. I have made it to the interview. I remember how nervous I was, entering the interview room and meeting Mr. Herman, who as I have read at the program's website was supposed to be *"international consultant with over 30 years of experience in business and economic development in Central and Eastern Europe, Central and South Asia, and the United States"*. Inside were 4 more people including Mr. Simeon Brodsky, Director of CTY international. Everyone was waiting for me to prove that I am the right candidate. I have survived and look at me now- landing in New York City...

Our group of 9 Czech and Slovak students was one of the first arrivers to Whitman College where CTY students were accommodated. For Princeton students it was a "regular residential house", for me, comparing it to what I know as "residential house" of Czech or Slovak University, it was a castle. Not only because of the long hallways reminding us of the horror movie "Shining" or massive wooden furniture of the rooms, but mainly because of the general castle-like medieval architecture and pointy towers. You could almost see John Nash lecturing on his game theory or Albert Einstein theorizing on relativity of the universe.

This castle like perception was supported by the loads of rules and orders, which cracked my initial euphoria. "You always have to wear your lanyard. You always have to be on time. You cannot enter girl's floor. You can only leave the building with your Residential Assistant. You have to be in cafeteria for breakfast, lunch and dinner. You have to attend one of the afternoon activities." On the contrary to these often annoying rules, people enforcing these rules were indeed nice, so I could not help but wonder "Why?" Your only couple years older supervisor of course trusts you, that you won't burn the house down while cooking a soup and also does not doubt your ability to cross the zebra safely without jumping late enough for the driver not to notice in front of the one car that rides over the zebra in an hour . It is the system. Not every camp happens in Princeton where criminality is only seen on the stages of theaters. Some camps are located deep in a forest or in dangerous neighborhoods and parents want their children to be safe. To make the law equal and clear all camps have to follow these rules and because of strong enforceability of the law US can be proud of, rules are followed.

As people started arriving I first had to correct my misconception of what are American kids. I started realizing that besides Native Americans no one is purely American. Therefore I did not only get to

know American culture but also the culture of Jordanian American, Chinese American, Costa Rican American etc. Next step in exploring the culture was realizing that because of how big US is anything you might say about it will be true for some parts but almost certainly false for others. This has led me to realize the difference between Californian Chinese American and Texas Chinese American and also Rural Californian Chinese American and Urban Californian Chinese American. Continuing at this pace I managed to only see people by the evening. One thing that managed to exceed the diversity of cultures was the diversity of talents. I have met young experimental physicists, basketball players, poets, sign language dancers, and comedians.

However soon I have observed some very interesting CTY American cultural traits, which I was assured, can be extended to many other American cultures. Tolerance and acceptance was one of these traits. Diverse communities of both CTY and US, aspiring to be the melting pots of the world's ideas genuinely welcomed differences and new ideas. I have seen and learned how important it is to be surrounded by diverse people because even if I could not accept their ideas as mine, at least I was constantly forced to think about my conceptions and in the end I could always agree to disagree. The niceness of people was another well noticeable trait. Everyone smiled and seemed excited about helping me with whatever I currently needed. I still don't know the full name of the site director because I always referred to him simply as Jeremiah the same goes for my teacher Laura- the best international relations teacher to be found.

I have saved the best for the last- my course, mysteriously called Human Rights and Justice- one semester worth university course delivered by Graduate School teacher with help of our course book *"Theories of International Relations and Zombies"*. The first class started with my teacher Laura speaking at a rate more similar to a TV reporter in a crisis situation than boring Slovak language teacher lecture. With her engaging style, current world affair examples and parodies of state leader's cognitive processes when solving problems classes felt more like shows people bought tickets for than lectures students desperately wanted to leave. Amazing as Laura's shows were they were not the main part of the course. We have spent majority of the time engaged in discussions, debates, undertaking individual research or preparing responses to Zombie Apocalypse that caught us unprepared after lunch.

Three weeks later, I stood in a dancing hall hugging my best friends in a circle of all CTY students, singing "American Pie". It was the last day of CTY. I have left Princeton knowing much more about Human Rights and myself. Though I was sad and tired after staying up all night and saying good bye, I still was just getting to the icing on the cake- The final weekend in NYC allowing me to get to know at least a bit Mr. Herman and the stories and culture of Czech and Slovak immigrants to the US during communism, current Czech and Slovak Americans supporting the AFCSLS, trying to give back to community and accelerate the development of our two little countries. More vividly than seeing skyscrapers I recall talking to Mr. Henry Kallan, who managed to advance from a bell-boy to a hotel manager and now owner of multiple successful hotels, Mrs. Ája Vrzáňová, the 1949 and 1950 world figure skating champion, and Mr. Jan Vilcek escaping communism to become a renown scientist.