

Fiona Spindeldreier (Düsseldorf, Germany), August 2015:



‘One’s destination is never a place, but a new way of seeing things.’

The true meaning of Arthur Miller’s famous quote came to me when I left Detroit on August 11th, after almost three, very intense weeks with [Growing Together Detroit](#).

When I arrived in the city, I had no clue what to expect. To be honest, people back home in Germany even got me a little nervous by constantly asking me either ‘What do you want to do in a city like Detroit? Why don’t you go to NYC or LA instead?’ and ‘Isn’t it a bit of a too rough city for a girl like you, Fiona?’. But I tried to put those thoughts aside on July 25th, when I finally stepped out of Detroit Metro Airport, ready for *Growing Together Detroit* to begin. When ARSP’s Mark McGuigan picked me and another participants up at the airport and drove us to our team house in South West Detroit, I was curious about my fellow participants. Later that night, while we were having pizza, I finally had met them all: four Germans, one Israeli and two Americans. I want to take the chance to thank everybody from Repair the World, especially Ben Falik, Program Director of Repair the World in Detroit and his volunteers Leah Mack and Mordechai Smith. They welcomed us in their house in South West Detroit and let us turn it into our ‘home’. Thereby they made it possible that we could GROW TOGETHER as a team and turn these two and a half weeks into something we will always remember.

The first day of the program brought us to the east side of Detroit where we had a tour around the neighborhood where we would be working during the next weeks. I was overwhelmed by how generously Karen ‘Chava’ Knox, the initiator of the Eden Garden Block Club, was sharing her house



with us. She welcomed us so warmly that I initially knew we would have a good time there – no matter how frightful the neighborhood and the vacant houses looked at first sight. Already during the neighborhood tour, any potential barriers were taken down. Especially the kids of the area showed no fear of getting to know us. I personally really enjoyed the fact that Chava’s eight-year-old grandson Antwoine was joining us for the tour and the other days working in the garden. We instantly connected and by meeting him and seeing the world through his eyes I have the feeling it was even easier for me to open up to all the new experiences that awaited us.

‘Teamwork makes the dream work.’ This slogan explains best how we were actually able to achieve as much as we did—by working together. It was great to see how we were able to overcome all potential prejudices and simply unite for this good cause. As we learned during our session on “Intellectual

Empathy” with Maureen Linker from the University of Michigan, it is normal to have prejudices. No one can or should deny it. But it is all about trying to overcome them by starting communicating and interacting. I truly believe that by interacting with people from different backgrounds you learn the most. This is why I applied for this program. I wanted to broaden my horizon.

Besides working in the garden, we learned a lot about the city, its history and its current trends concerning community building and economical restructuring. It was great to get to know people that are so encouraging in leading Detroit back on track after the city’s bankruptcy in 2013. I have especially enjoyed three events of the program that Richard A. Bachmann and Andrea Möllering, our amazing teamers, set up: Firstly, the service at the Isaac Agree Downtown Synagogue and the following host weekend, secondly, the tour with Rich Feldman from the Grace Lee Boggs Center and thirdly, the meetings with Honorary Consul Fred Hoffman and Detroit Deputy Mayor Isaiah McKinnon.



At the Isaac Agree Downtown Synagogue we had the chance to speak with its director Anna Kohn, and one of its current 300 members: Ariel Payne. At the synagogue, we prepared a kosher Shabbat dinner for the congregation before we attended services together with the congregants. I liked to see how committed everyone was to support the last of formerly 53 synagogues in Detroit. Especially meeting Ariel, a 27-year-old Afro-American, was a true inspiration to me. He told us about growing up in an Afro-American and Jewish neighborhood and about converting to Judaism in his 20s. He reminded us that ‘faith without work is death’. Without going out in the world and taking action, ‘you can be a wonderful person, but a horrible Jew’. For me, the same goes for a Protestant, Muslim or Catholic.

The Shabbat Dinner later that evening was simply great as we got to know our host parents with whom we stayed for the entire weekend. My host parents, Amy and Tim, welcomed my two ‘brothers’, Ibrahim and Nils, as well as me into their family as warmly as Chava had done the other day. They had set up an amazing program for us to dive into the world of suburban Detroiters. That Saturday we got the chance to go to one of their friends’ house and to ride on a boat including receiving our first Wakeboarding lesson of our lives. As we were out on the lake, passing mansion after mansion, everything simply felt surreal. It is amazing how different people’s lives can be though there are just a few miles apart. I once again learned, that no matter how many possessions you have, it is actually about the people you interact with that define your happiness in life. Marc and Rachel, the owners of both the house and the boat, stressed a couple of times, while we were thanking them overwhelmingly for their generosity, that owning a mansion or a fancy boat is not fulfilling. Sharing it with others and participating in their joy is.

During the tour we did with Rich Feldman from the *James and Grace Lee Boggs Center*, we got the chance to get to know other projects besides Eden Garden’s that are going on on the east side of

Detroit. I especially liked the Heidelberg project which was initiated by Tyree Guyton back in 1986. By creating this urban art place, he definitely contributed to his community, gave people and especially kids in his area the chance to get themselves educated about art. But most of all, he has made the neighborhood where he grew up and himself lost three brothers, a safer place.

Furthermore, we visited a project by Reg Flowers. He is originally from Brooklyn and moved to Detroit to open up an alternative hostel, where people can stay and learn about community building. I really liked his initiative to educate people about what is going on in Detroit, so that they can take it back home and apply it to other cities that were formerly focused on just one type of industry.

The time we spent with Fred Hoffmann, German Honorary Consul in Detroit, his future husband Jim, and Detroit Deputy Mayor Isaiah McKinnon was so heartwarming and informative that I would not like to miss it for anything in this world. After our meeting with Mayor Mike Duggan and Deputy Mayor Isaiah McKinnon a couple of days before, it was the Mr. McKinnon who came up to us and invited us for dinner. It was refreshing to see that a person who has met role models like Nelson Mandela and several former Presidents of the United States, was still interested in the thoughts of us normal college students. And Fred Hoffman and his partner Jim show me, that love wins—always—no matter what obstacles there could be. And that teamwork and open communication is key—if for a long-lasting relationship or community work.



To sum up, my German friend's thoughts were proven wrong from day one. Never have I met such generous and honest people as during these three weeks in Detroit. I truly want to take the chance to thank everyone from ARSP in the US and Germany, who let me participate in this program. Basically, I have learned two things during my stay in Detroit: First, by taking action YOU CAN bring change into this world. And by this world, I mean your world, your community, your neighborhood. Second, to do so you need the help of like-minded people. So surround yourself with people who do not try to bring you down, but who share your vision and help you making it happen.