

# 12<sup>th</sup> Fulbright International Summer Institute

www.fisi-bg.info



**Official FISI Opening**

From left to right: Dr. Julia Stefanova, FISI Director; Prof. Anelia Klisarova, Minister of Education and Science, and Natalia Miteva, Program Director at the America for Bulgaria Foundation



FISI participants

The twelfth Fulbright International Summer Institute (FISI) took place at the RIU Pravets Resort on August 12-23, 2013. Hundred and eleven students from Bulgaria, Afghanistan, Albania, Azerbaijan, Croatia, Cyprus, France, Greece, Pakistan, Singapore, Ukraine, and USA took part in the Institute. Their academic backgrounds ranged from political science, law, economics, international relations, history and business administration to information technology, philosophy, communications and media, biological sciences, anthropology, philanthropy, linguistics, German studies, sociology, and musicology.

FISI 2013 was organized by the Bulgarian Fulbright Commission but its ultimate success heavily depended on the financial support, cooperation and synergy of several other institutions: **America for**



U.S. Ambassador to Bulgaria Marcie Ries talking to the group of 1st week FISI participants

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Welcome dinner with the participation of Marcie Ries, U.S. Ambassador to the Republic of Bulgaria

**Bulgaria** Foundation, the **U.S. Embassy**, Sofia University and its Centre of Excellence **Dialogue Europe**, the Ross School of Business at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor.

Among the participants were 26 BA students from the Ross School of Business led by Professor George Siedel. They attended his course on **Negotiation and Conflict Resolution** and were offered a special program that involved meetings with prominent Bulgarian entrepreneurs and visits to business companies. Upon return to the U.S., the students were supposed to write a consulting report on doing business in Bulgaria – you can read the best one, by Phyllis Lam, [here](#), courtesy of Prof. Siedel.

Dr. Syed Hussain Shaheed Soherwordi from the University of Peshawar, Pakistan, also brought students from their home institutions. Doctoral and postdoctoral students from the Centre of Excellence at Sofia University attended special team-taught courses and participated in a research forum. Master's students from the program in philosophy and the program in communication, language and literature, both offered at Sofia University, also participated and received credits for the classes they had selected.

FISI offered a total of 12 interdisciplinary courses conducted by 31 distinguished professors and experts from prestigious universities and institutions such as Harvard University, University of Michigan, University of Peshawar, Sofia University, New Bulgarian University, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, Arizona State University, Tufts University, University of Dayton, Phelps Dunbar LLP, Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, American Research Center in Sofia (ARCS), Bulgarian National Radio, The Red House Center for Culture and Debate and the Association of European Journalists – Bulgaria.

The new group of 24 English Teaching Assistants were offered a six-day professional training which involved presentations, workshops and discussions with Bulgarian mentor teachers, ETA alumni, and TOEFL experts from ETS. The sessions were devoted to topics related to the ETA work in class: lesson planning, classroom manage-

ment, assessment, extracurricular activities, multilevel teaching and many more.

Along with the FISI courses, the new group of American Fulbright lecturers, graduate students, and ETAs were offered cultural orientation, professional training and an intensive two-week course in Bulgarian language. The interdisciplinary **Bulgarian Culture** course introduced participants to Bulgaria's history, education, media and science.

Official guests were part of different segments of the Institute's program. Prof. Anelia Klisarova, Minister of Education and Science, and Natalia Miteva, Program Director at the America for Bulgaria Foundation greeted all participants at the official opening on August 12. U.S. Ambassador to Bulgaria Marcie Ries gave a short speech in front of all participants and met with the new batch of Fulbright English Teaching Assistants. Elizabeth Fitzsimmons, Public Affairs Officer at the U.S. Embassy and Richard Seipert, Deputy Regional Security Officer participated in an orientation session for the AY 2013-14 US grantees.

A visit to the **Saeva Dupka** Cave and the scenic Troyan Monastery in the village of Oreshak offered FISI participants a glimpse of the beautiful nature and the rich cultural heritage of Bulgaria, as well as a taste of the traditional Bulgarian cuisine. Classical music lovers had the chance to enjoy the opera **Aida** and the ballet **W. A. Mozart – Prodigy of Europe** on the lake stage at RIU Pravets Resort as part of the ninth edition of the annual Mozart Festival.

We would like to thank all students, lecturers and participating institutions for making FISI such a memorable experience!

Special recognition and gratitude is due to **America for Bulgaria** Foundation and the **Embassy of the United States of America** for their generous financial support.

The contribution of the Centre of Excellence **Dialogue Europe** at Sofia University is also greatly appreciated.



FISI students



FISI class





*FISI class*



*FISI class*



*Workshop for the new group of ETAs with the participation of iBT TOEFL experts from ETS*



*Orientation for US Grantees*



*Orientation for US Grantees*



*Elizabeth Fitzsimmons, Public Affairs Officer at the U.S. Embassy and Board member, and Richard Seipert, Deputy Regional Security Officer, talking to the new group of US Fulbright grantees*





*Business visits to Pravets Golf Club*



*Business visits to Hewlett Packard-Bulgaria*



*Trip to Saeva Dupka Cave*



*Golf course at Pravets Golf Club*



*Farewell party*



Farewell party



FISl Closing Awarding certificates to 2013 FISl graduates



FISl Closing Awarding certificates to 2013 FISl graduates



## БЪЛГАРО-АМЕРИКАНСКА КОМИСИЯ ЗА ОБРАЗОВАТЕЛЕН ОБМЕН

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За информация: София 1504, ул. Панайот Волов 1, етаж II, тел. 944 0441, E-mail: [studycenter@fulbright.bg](mailto:studycenter@fulbright.bg), [www.fulbright.bg](http://www.fulbright.bg)





## Message from Prof. Dr. Julia Stefanova about the 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Bulgarian Fulbright Commission

Dear Colleagues and friends,  
Some of you may know that this year is special for the Bulgarian Fulbright Commission because it marks its 20th anniversary. In 1992 a bilateral agreement was signed between the Governments of Bulgaria and the United States on establishing a Commission for Educational Exchange. The Commission started operating early in 1993 at a crucial moment in the history of Bulgaria and Eastern Europe: the collapse of totalitarian socialism and the beginning of a long and dramatic transition to democracy and market economy. It was not at all easy to build a completely new type of institution under conditions of almost permanent turbulence and uncertainty. Ironically speaking, today, two decades later, we are still shaking but the bumpy road travelled by the Commission so far has undeviatingly led upward. The Bulgarian Fulbright Commission took firm root on the Bulgarian soil, grew and became strong thanks to the steady support of the governments of Bulgaria and the US, the competence, professionalism and dedication of the Commission members and administrative staff as well as the help we received from you, the Fulbright alumni. The extraordinary harmony and synergy among individuals and institutions has been fostered by the great power, significance and intransience of the Fulbright cause of promoting understanding among human communities through exchange of knowledge, education and cultural and moral values.

In 2013 the total number of the members of the Bulgarian-American Fulbright community has reached 1081: 533 Bulgarians and 548 Americans. Of them 899 (431 Bulgarians and 478 Americans) became grantees and alumni after the establishment of the Commission. The reasons for the dramatic increase of Fulbright grantees after 1993 are manifold: radical socio-political changes, the new constructive spirit of Bulgarian-American relations, democratization and professionalization of selection criteria as well as the wide range of activities the Commission developed to make information about the Fulbright competition and educational opportunities in the US widely accessible. The menu of Fulbright scholarships has been enriched to include more categories of grants for graduate study, research, lecturing and professional training.

In sum, so far the balance is more than good, deficits and liabilities are negligible and we can proudly face the anniversary of our mature youth or young maturity.

The Fulbright Commission is preparing an official event for the occasion on November 4 this year. We will invite a lot of Fulbright alumni because we will be delighted to see them, talk to them and share ideas and dreams about the future of Fulbright, education and science. It will be great if some of you can attend too.

To make the celebration even more memorable, we have decided to establish a Fulbright alumni scholarship to support young researchers and graduate students.

If you are willing to help the realization of this wonderful idea, please send your contributions to the Bulgarian Fulbright Commission by wire transfer or check.

### Wire transfer information:

*Bulgarian-American Commission for Educational Exchange  
Bank: Raiffeisen Bank Bulgaria 5, Saborna Str.,  
1000 Sofia, Bulgaria  
Bank Code BIC: RZBBBGSF  
Bank account in USD- IBAN: BG15RZBB91551161044018*

### Check made payable to:

*Bulgarian-American Commission for Educational Exchange  
17 Alexander Stamboliiski Blvd.  
Sofia 1000, Bulgaria*

I would like to most cordially congratulate you, the American Fulbright alumni, on the 20th anniversary of the Bulgarian Fulbright Commission and sincerely thank you for your great help, commitment and good will.

*Julia Stefanova  
Executive Director*

## Fulbright Office News

### Orientation for Fulbright ETAs August 12-20, Pravets, 2013

The Bulgarian Fulbright Commission organized an orientation for the AY 2013-14 US English Teaching Assistants in Pravets, Bulgaria, August 12-20, 2013. The orientation was incorporated in the Fulbright International Summer Institute and was designed to assist the grantees in their professional and cultural adaptation. Special guests were US Ambassador Marcie Ries, US Embassy officers, and the co-sponsors from *America for Bulgaria* Foundation.

Sixty-three participants including ETAs, mentor teachers, lecturers and school principals discussed aspects of the Bulgarian educational system, classroom culture, methodology of teaching English as a foreign language, teaching American standardized tests, evaluation of learning, and administrative components of high school management.

To encourage an open exchange, the Commission held a round-table on Bulgarian life, cultural adaptation, time management, proximity, family and friends, religion and regional differences. The training ended with mock lessons demonstrating the young teachers' progress. Of course, there was also time for informal meetings and fun.

We wish the 27 US English teaching assistants a very successful and memorable year in Bulgaria!

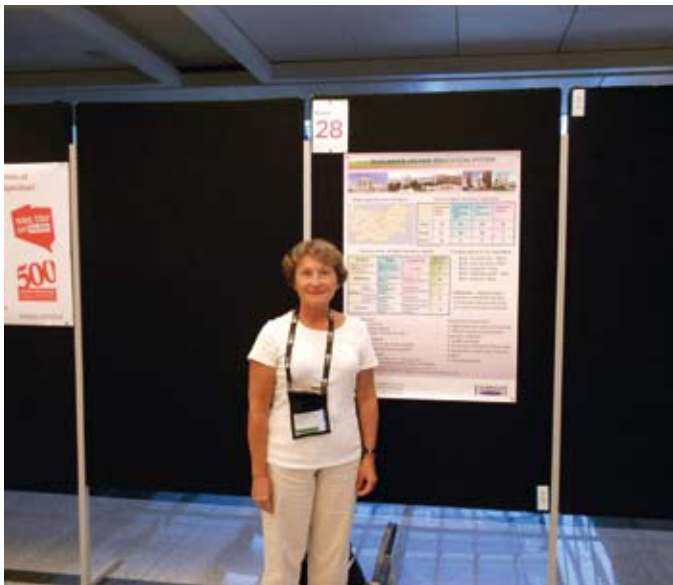


**Official Opening of the Orientation for the English Teaching Assistants at FISI**  
From left to right: *Marcie Ries, U.S. Ambassador to the Republic of Bulgaria; Dr. Julia Stefanova, FISI Director; Natalia Miteva, Program Director at the America for Bulgaria Foundation*



*Professional training for the English Teaching Assistants*

## 2013 EAIE Conference in Istanbul, Turkey *Weaving the Future of Global Partnerships*



*The Bulgarian booth at the EAIE Poster Fair.*

The 25<sup>th</sup> Annual EAIE Conference was held in Istanbul, Turkey, on September 10-13, 2013. More than 4,000 international education professionals from around the world discussed the most crucial topics in international education and exchange today, from international admissions and study abroad to global education trends and international education policy.

A major highlight of the conference was the International Education Exhibition Hall which featured exhibitors representing more than 200 organizations from around the world, including colleges and universities, study abroad and intensive-English programs, embassies and government agencies, and more. EducationUSA adviser Snezhana Teneva attended the conference and made use of the many opportunities to obtain new information, network and promote EducationUSA and Bulgarian education. Bulgaria was represented at the Poster Session *National Higher Education Systems* with a special stand, visited by over 30 participants from 9 countries.

## EducationUSA and Wellesley College Information Sessions at the American Corners in Sofia and Plovdiv



*EducationUSA adviser Snezhana Teneva, giving a presentation on the EducationUSA Achievement Program at the American Corner in Sofia.*



*Wellesley College presentation at the American Corner in Plovdiv.*



## To Chicago and Back

### George Yankov

MA student, Organizational Psychology

Sofia University "St. Kliment Ochridski", Sofia, Bulgaria

Host institution in the US: Baruch College, The City University of New York, New York, NY

AY 2012-2013

If you read this, then there is a strong probability that you are a student or young professional who needs information on what it is like to be a Fulbrighter in the USA. Perhaps you intend to apply? Perhaps you are still not fully convinced whether the Fulbright scholarship is worthwhile pursuing. I tell you with two words: DO IT. You should do it, especially if you are bright enough to be selected to be a Full-bright grantee. Jokes aside, bright enough in this context means prepared to: 1) take the GRE and TOEFL exams with flying colors, 2) go to the interviews where you must explain ambitiously and constructively why you want to study in the USA and how this will eventually contribute to your own country – Bulgaria. But be mindful. The USA is the New World. Everything is so different from Europe and the faster one realizes and learns to accept this fact, the more one will reap from the whole experience.

I applied for the Fulbright scholarship because it will contribute to my professional and personal aims. My intention is to become the first industrial-organizational psychologist in Bulgaria that has graduated the discipline from "the Mecca" of it – USA and has actually transferred the knowledge back. There are three or four persons in Bulgaria that have graduated an I/O psychology master's or PhD program in the USA but they do not pass the knowledge, in fact they are not at all academically-oriented. You see already that I have a humanist agenda – education. I desire to bring the most innovative practices in my professional area back to Bulgaria, to transfer "new and fresh knowledge" to Bulgarian university students. Hopefully after I gain substantial experience in the field I wish



Brooklyn Bridge

to found my own human resources consulting company. I decided to accept the admission offer of Baruch College (the flagship college of the City University of New York ) because of its best-quality, financially affordable and proven-in-tradition graduate program in I/O psychology. Now, the first semester having already finished and the second in the middle my goal is less than a year ahead to be fulfilled. But what is time in NYC? Time flies, time is relative to the experiences of the soul as St. Augustine argued centuries ago. Time in New York is measured not by abstract measurement units, but by the events and experiences you have had.

## Initial encounters

On the 30<sup>th</sup> of July 2012 I started my long journey to the USA. The last time I had taken “the long flight” over the Atlantic was in 2007, when I participated in a Work and Travel program in Ocean City, Maryland. This time I flew the enormous 21 hours in total: from Sofia to Istanbul, then to Chicago, then to Oklahoma City. My gateway orientation was to take place in the small city of Norman, which is something of an outgrowth borough of Oklahoma City. Close to midnight I stepped out of the Oklahoma airport and instantly realized how hot the weather was. The air was dry and heavy, probably what in Bulgaria is 40 degrees Celsius. Quickly I grasped the wisdom of living in fully air-conditioned rooms, the temperature inside being about 20 degrees lower than the one outside. Only later did I learn that these 5 days that I spent in Oklahoma were record breakers. Anyway, the weather was not what I was concerned about taking much notice of. I have visited not one or two international conferences but this was something new: It was virtually EVERYTHING. I was surrounded by the most wonderful and rich combination of international students. All continents were represented and each participant had a story to tell. I did as much networking as my purposefully enforced “sleep deprivation” could allow me. During this orientation I realized how special it is to be a Fulbrighter, and at the same time the one thing that unites all Fulbrighters – the respect for the American political values and the excellent educational system in the US.

## The physical New York

But what makes Americans so successful in order to be respected by representatives of many nations and cultures? What did I observe in the USA as most progressive and undoubtedly positive? When I arrived in New York City (NYC) on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of August I started realizing some of the answers. It took me some time to extrapolate and truly understand a few basic truths about the American society in general. My previous stay was more for work and was spent amid international students, now it is “a serious business”. I study at Baruch College, surrounded by extremely diverse and intelligent students and I literally feel at the center of everything I desire to be at the center of. Yes, New York gives such opportunities – to find anything that intrigues you, the people, the places, the culture, the emotions, etc. It just depends on what you want to do. Naturally, the atmosphere is of an intercultural and business-oriented melting pot and, therefore, many students find it hard to concentrate on their studies. They either party or work too much, which affects the learning process.

Yes, “the distractors” are powerful in NYC. Oscar Wilde famous quote “The best way to escape temptation is to give in to it” is completely relevant in New York. However, I was lucky enough to have found a room some 20 meters from where once stood Fort Washington, in the area of Washington Heights, the uppermost part of Manhattan. Here I am surrounded by two splendid parks, many squirrels and fresh air coming from the ocean and upstate New York. The place itself is the highest geographic point in Manhattan – 81 meters above sea level. It reminds me of Dublin, where I studied for one year in the past. So green and quiet is the vicinity of the apartment, thus being the right place for one to write his homeworks. I cannot imagine living downtown - it would have totally routed my academic program. I cannot afford it too. But a real New Yorker does not care where you live, he will care who you are, what you say and do. Therefore any comparisons and boasts about living in Manhattan are irrelevant for cultured people in the city.

But in general the atmosphere for living in NYC is excellent. I believe that despite its overpopulation New York has much cleaner air than Sofia. The water comes from the Adirondack Mountains and is considered one of the purest in the USA. The food is absolutely not typical American – and that is good for my Mediterranean taste. I can buy anything I need from the Italian, Russian, Indian, Chinese, Turkish, Greek, American shops. With the all-reaching subway system and an unlimited metro card one can find whatever food he desires in any corner of the megapolis. It is a mighty, a true empire city and it represents what the USA stays for – industry, intelligence, free speech, laws, commerce. I saw with my two eyes how fast they restored the train service in the ravaged subway tunnels and stations after hurricane Sandy. I witnessed how people, on the second day after the hurricane were performing feats in order to go to work, to earn their wages, to feed their families. Any extrapolations to Bulgaria and a hypothetical aftermath of a similar in magnitude natural disaster I leave to you. The organization and discipline of professional work here reaches such heights that I already know why the USA is the generator-space for management and the organizational sciences.

## The cultural New York

What more can be said about culture in NYC than “come and see it yourself”? From the Museum of Natural History (the largest in the world of its kind) to the Metropolitan Museum of Art (a.k.a. the Met), from the Museum of Modern Art (a.k.a. the MoMa) to Guggenheim Museum, from NYC Historical Society to the Empire State Building – these are the usual



tourist paths. But there are many, many more small museums worthwhile to visit. Guess why 5th Avenue in upper Manhattan is famously dubbed the "Museum Mile". In general, each of the big museums requires at least a couple of days to be explored. I did it many times during the summer with the Met, as I adore Rodin's sculptures there and the spectacular garden on the roof too. The picture gallery is not so much to my landscapist taste, but I found superb Titian's, Rubens' and Monet's. These museums are all situated around Central Park which is a safe haven for leisurely walks and reflection when sitting at the end of some of its artificial lakes. In the spring and summer Central Park is a hub for thousands of artists, live musicians, young intellectuals and what can I say – the "cream" of the world I suppose. But the museums are only the dead art. Through the cultural events office of the Institute of International Education any Fulbrighter can avail of free tickets for various cultural events in the city. I, as a lover of classical instrumental music, go regularly to symphonic and string concerts, sometimes even in the world-famous Isaac Stern Hall of Carnegie Hall. In any case, the number of free cultural events in the city is astonishing; one just needs to google a point of interest in order to discover a society/association in NYC that provides for the specific niche.

I will subsume architecture under culture, for it is the living sign of past culture. I adore architecture and I devote as much time as I can to exploring the buildings downtown. All skyscrapers have their own history, their own tale to recount. Once places of mighty corporations, some of them are now just hotels or malls (unfortunately my favourite Woolworth Building is one of these). However, the frizzes, the columns, the arches are there and one needs a very good guide to decipher the specific symbolism of each building. Some residential buildings in NY were the first of its kind in architectural history. For example, the 810 Fifth Avenue. Who does not want to be invited to a dinner at this condominium where an apartment stretches a whole floor, where Rockefeller and Nixon have lived? And what can I say about the bridges, the Statue of Liberty, Staten Island, Ellis Island? Well they need "their own" days for exploration. The other boroughs? Besides Manhattan I love Brooklyn too. Its zoo, botanical garden, its historical museum, Prospect Park, Park Slope, posh Greenpoint and Williamsburg areas, the vibrant Russian and Jewish neighborhoods in Coney Island – Brooklyn is completely different from Manhattan. I am now working on a plan to explore Brooklyn further than the usual rides to Brighton Beach to walk along the ocean boardwalk. All in all, to experience the full culture in NYC is impossible, therefore, I concentrate on what I like and deem significant for my attention. Be mindful that I have to go to the college too.

## Academic Life

The semesters are 12-week "hectic-ity" here. The main rule: never get behind with the syllabus, studying is an ongoing process, midterms and finals are just test events you have to be preparing for from the first lecture in each course. I am lucky to have learned how the Anglo-Saxon educational system "works" from my studies in Dublin. Continuous assessment is the key word in this system. Unending essays, homeworks, labs, midterms and finals, and these all scale down to one single grade. If you persevere and do not slack off the grades will be "A"s, as is in my case. Certainly it was not easy, but it is not as hard as some people say it is. I have been reading American scientific and philosophical literature for years, and to read and make notes on 50 to 80 pages a day is more of a standard than a challenge for me. It seems that I have done well with my self-education, doesn't it? That is why it is comparatively easy for me to manage with the academic tasks. The library, well, I have never seen so well-managed library, even in one of the richest universities in Germany. The interlibrary loan is fast and they can get you a book from as far as Alaska or Texas. For free! Almost always one can borrow books that according to WorldCat are not in any European university library.

The lecturers are very warm people and contrary Bulgaria where the method of "ex cathedra preaching" is still to be seen, here, if one does not participate in class then one will actually lose points from the final grade. The theory is "put on the backseat" because it is assumed that any student can read it at home or find it in the library. To lectures one should come already prepared for what is going to be presented and the lecture turns to be a nice presentation/interactive discussion on practice-related issues. I have observed that the enormous stress on practice sometimes robs students from a critical perspective, but this probably comes from the difference between the European-Continental and the Anglo-Saxon educational systems. The master's programs (MSc, MA, MBA, LL.M) here are exceptionally designed to teach robust skills and knowledge towards a professional career.

## Networking

Thanks to the organization called "One to World" I was able to attend the 64<sup>th</sup> annual student conference on United States affairs. Each year it takes place in the world-famous West Point Military academy and its aim is to bring together international students, these being the future political, business and technology leaders of their respective countries. The students help US policymakers to design the most effective

policies for world cooperation and peace. At the conference, for its 4 days, I met quite a few bright minds coming from 33 countries. Actually, I enriched myself with so many different perspectives, only to realize how challenging, exciting and responsible it is to negotiate for common causes at a global level. I was able to meet and talk to the granddaughter of President Dwight Eisenhower – Susan Eisenhower, a world-famous policy maker and president of the Eisenhower Group, which provides strategic counsel on political, business and public affairs projects. Next month I am going to a similar global leadership conference, but this time it will take place at the US Navy's academy in Annapolis, Maryland. The next week after this conference comes my enrichment seminar in Philadelphia. So I guess I should take a thick sheaf of business cards, don't you think?

I also joined the association of I/O students in NYC and met students of my science from Columbia University, NYU and Hofstra University. We have regular events when we come together for a party-dinner to discuss issues from the real-life practice of organizational consulting and development. Moreover, I participate in One to World's program "Meetings with World Leaders" where we, Fulbright students

meet the CEO's of the world's largest corporations. In these conversations they respond to our questions and give us advices about our future "dream" projects and career paths in global organizations. I network regularly with my professors at the college and they give me precious advices for my future professional and PhD plans. My other scholarship – Thanks for Scandinavia – is a way for me to network and meet the leaders of Jewish community in NY and worldwide. Through the American Jewish Committee I met many people who care for the well-being, understanding and progress of Jewish communities across the world. We should not forget that nowadays in Bulgaria we experience peculiar radicalization of social activism which has never been seen before. We must never let ideologies and radicals rob simple, common Bulgarians from their greatest virtue – humanity and respect for "the Other".

I leave you now, reader of this paper, and wish to you all the industry and determination of the American, for they will discipline you to fulfill your dreams.

**Disclaimer:**

*The text is published in its original and unedited version.*

## Bulgarian Fulbright Alumni Association Membership Form



Full name .....

Home address .....

Field, Academic Rank and Degree .....

Present Place and Address of Employment .....

Phone, Fax .....

Type, Year and Duration of Grant .....

Place and Name of Host Institution .....

*Please complete and return to the Fulbright Commission office address.*



## Out of America

### Lillyan Ling

#### Fulbright English Teaching Assistant, AY 2012-13 “Geo Milev” Foreign Language High School, Dobrich, Bulgaria

**M**y first night in Dobrich had little to do with Dobrich. Before the school year started, I had booked a plane ticket from Varna to London Heathrow so that I could attend a family friend’s wedding in Hertfordshire. Dobrich is a town about 50 minutes from that great coastal city, Varna—famous to me for being the departure port of Dracula’s Demeter—and because my apartment was not quite ready, my mentor teacher kindly offered accommodation at her own house for the single night before the flight.

We had mutually surprised one another upon our first meeting. Unbeknownst to me, she had expected the image of my Skype profile picture to materialize—a picture that had at the time been a goofy and disgruntled face of one of my friends from home, a white, brown-haired, and tall girl, and I, descending from the steps of the bus, presented myself—the short, dark-haired daughter of two Chinese immigrants. I myself did not know exactly what to expect, having seen her name on documents. Perhaps a generically friendly, fifty-ish, semi-drab Bulgarian woman clad in dark and earthy colors? No, not quite. When I stepped into her home, she was cooing “Brucey baby” at a German Shepard in her husky smoker’s voice, throwing fries into a heater of some sort, pouring me Kamenitza, describing her love for Freddie Mercury, encouraging me to eat ice cream in bed, and informing me that she had to at some point Skype her boyfriend—a British man who used to sell exotic birds on the market before it was forbidden. This description could have easily applied to an American college student. I was delighted.

Generally speaking, I try not to enter a new environment with any expectations at all, but if I did form any in my subconscious, they were certainly being proved wrong already.

Now that about two weeks remain in the school year, I’ve been emailing the new ETA, finalizing in-class awards ceremo-



nies, and searching for thank you gifts. Naturally, the ending of a chapter inspires reflection, and I contemplate the success rate of what my initial goals were. But in order to measure something like “success,” one has to realize this unfamiliar environment’s standard of “neutrals” and “failures,” judgments which vary from context to context.

Even with an undergraduate degree and an analytical brain—filled with specific facts, trained to write, read, and talk—one can easily crumble when facing the Bulgarian adolescent audience. They can be a tough, tough crowd. There are moments in class when everything is going completely right, save for the attitude of the entire student body in the room. I have paused many times in the midst of frustrations and soaked in the surreal environment of a typically disordered classroom littered with incessant chatter and phone clicking. I have cried in front of a room of ninth graders. It is often the case that no one participates or pays attention, that no one even silences when I pause, waiting for students to settle down. It is impossible for students to fathom assigned seating, detentions, hall passes, or high attendance rates in

the months of May and June. Some days I try my best, cringe through class, and then go home to noisily pour out to other ETAs on Facebook.

Outside of the classroom has its fair shares of hiccups as well. The water will shut off randomly because the water company owes the electric company millions of leva. And the water heater will randomly break for weeks. I've been stuck in an elevator for thirty minutes. I've been groped by an old man. It has taken me twelve hours to take a journey that would be three hours by car. I enter grades into my laptop, only to document them on paper in school grade books. And of course, like many others, I've been misled numerous times by websites about the existence of imaginary buses. These, of course, are just "tiny" inconveniences when considering the "heavier" ones (save the groping situation), but even after turning over these little moments in my mind, I realize that everything boils down to a simple statement: it's complicated. There are problems. And they are very much real, alive in the forgotten buildings and abandoned brutalist structures, the potholes and overgrown patches of weeds on the few roads that run across the country, the number of absences and incompletes in my grade book, the fourteen-year-olds smoking in front of the school between periods, the communities that literally live on the other side of the train tracks. It's complicated.

It is very easy for the initial enthusiastic energy to fade after time, especially after realizing that resources are less accessible and infrastructure is lacking. This is when the beautiful nature of the country seems to become overshadowed by repetitive and dull apartment complexes and the deep biting cold of the winter. In these moments, you have to look closely into the everyday details of your fellow teachers, neighbors, and students and realize those treasures that make the experience a memory of beautiful realisms. After all, a lot of my narrative consists of the narratives of others. And the first step to getting narratives out of complete strangers is by first revealing your own, and then by both realizing that strangers, in some aspects, can be similar. Only then did my students begin to listen intently to what I had to say, and only then were they willing to tell me about themselves. But there were some obstacles we had to face.

Because learning English is the priority of students of a foreign language high school, certain school days will not consist of one, but several classes dedicated to the English language. From what my students have told me, these classes focus strictly on textbook materials and routine progress through consecutive tasks. The methods of learning center around memorization and regurgitation with strict regard to the rules. Once in a while, they might be assigned presentations (which easily sound flat and recited, rather than conver-

sational), but otherwise, writing and speaking assignments are quite rare. Although I will totally promote memorization, recitation, and imitation as necessary methods for fundamentals, I usually regard them as training wheels for the more essential task of creating, and so my classes focus on speaking and writing. Though they are capable of following specific grammar rules, they find themselves silent when asked to use language for modes of self-expression.

This reminds me of an instance when I participated in a regional spelling bee in Ruse as a judge and announcer. I was amazed and tickled at the contestants' abilities to tackle English words such as "committee" and "archeology." Afterwards, I congratulated some of the spellers and asked them a few questions, only to find them unresponsive. I realized that this was not due to shyness but simply a lack of being able to converse in the language they were studying. Again, memorization had trumped self-expression—they had been given the list of words to study beforehand, so that actually knowing the language could have easily been irrelevant. I toyed with the idea of entering a spelling bee of Bulgarian words, even with my pathetic vocabulary bank of perhaps twenty terms.

The students' inability to express themselves could be attributed to several factors. Firstly, only ever being told what to say or do handicaps students when it comes time for them to speak for themselves. Because of this, I try to dedicate my classes to self-expression by emphasizing creativity, individuality, and agency. Sometimes I find myself more interested in these aspects than teaching the English language itself. This is partly due to a feeling of guilt—as English has become such a dominant language, teaching it makes me feel as if I were participating in some form of linguistic imperialism. (I've even realized its weight in social environments. Apparently it is "hip" to speak English, and oftentimes students who accompany me to random locations will inform me that others around us







are retorting in Bulgarian that we are merely speaking English to look “cool.”) And so, this is why I’ve steered my classes to be less about the language itself, and more about ways of thinking, creating, and various subjects of interest. Essay grades take into account originality as well as grammar, but favor the former over the latter. Word counts are suggested, but not mandatory. I tell them I want to read something interesting, something that I will remember, just as they want teachers of the same type. As they write in class, I write an essay with them simultaneously on the board. We finish. We share.

But then, the over-thinker in me is activated: while I discourage writing about the same topics in the same ways, I find myself involved in the paradox that all non-conformists conform to their own unwritten rules—on the Day of Diversity, the Bulgarian Youth Red Cross asked me, amongst others, to take a picture holding a self-made sign which said, “Differences Unite Us.” Mostly everyone wrote the words in plain, large handwriting. I thought I should write in block letters with a minimalist layout in order to display some a sort of different and inventive organization. My students saw this and turned to me and said, “The previous American teachers did the same thing.”

Secondly, students do not speak because they are not used to the idea that their opinions and perspectives matter. Of course, some of this has to do with a hesitancy that is universal in all high school social environments—what if I say something and everyone thinks it’s dumb and annoying? What if I make a mistake and look like a fool? Who even cares what I think? I try to combat this timidity by first choosing simple, relatable topics of discussion, then by probing them with further questions, and most importantly, by showing that I listen. The ever-present doubt of the belief in expressing one’s opinion is difficult to eradicate, and this entire “Who cares what I think? Who would even listen to me?” is especial-

ly reflective of student attitudes when examining real-world issues. But as electricity prices shot up, the protests grew louder, and the government resigned in February, each student presented a speech of their own topic to the class—they varied from the value of comic books to the nature of fear, the possibility of life on Mars to the origins of superstitions, the power of computer languages to smoker’s rights—and they were realizing the effect of the voice, and how its impact could even cause their leader to step down.

While I do my best to encourage dialogue in class, there will always be those who do not speak. This is especially frustrating as participation is a large grading factor in my class, and it is difficult to assess the speaking skills of a student who never opens their mouth but is obviously competent in the language. However, I have found that encountering students outside of school, whether planned or by chance, truly opens doors to exchanges that might have never taken place otherwise. I had never heard a few of the eleventh-graders speak until I sat with them at a café one day, and suddenly, two hours of conversation flew by. The same could be said of another student, who has been more talkative on the internet than in real life. This had me thinking.

I had a dear professor who held weekly tea sessions in his office as a sort of alternative to office hours. We would gather there every Thursday afternoon, grab our cup, throw in two cubes of sugar, nibble on cookies, and start talking. It was an old-fashioned but classic way of learning, by simply discussing, arguing, or bouncing ideas off of each other in the comfort of a small, well-furnished room. As the winter ended, I bought a set of eight cups and a pitcher and began my own version of such sessions, but with iced tea instead. Each time a snug number of eight students or so would show up. Those who never spoke in class would come and offer their two cents, and if not, at least their willing ears. Our weekly tea circles were lively and vibrant, and during one session, L had said, “I want to talk about taboos. I want to talk about things that people say we shouldn’t talk about, but maybe we should talk about.” I truly did not expect us to have a conversation that would eventually lead to the explanation of things such as Queer Theory, language ownership, attitudes towards sex and sexuality. We were talking over each other, creating queues for comments, and branching off into other areas. I paused our conversation to tell them what a golden moment this was.

If one of the main missions of the Fulbright Program is to encourage cultural exchange, then such topics *should* be brought up, and I was proud that these conversations were initiated without my first doing so. Because they are so relevant and current, they are inevitably sensitive and awkward. But only ever deliberating topics which everyone is generally



one-sided about results in little progress. Our hands have to dip into that uncomfortable mud in order for any valid cultural education to take place, and it's oftentimes precisely difficult situations that make us want to talk, that make us learn.

As another example, one of our most successful in-class discussions concerned communism and its effects in the social, economic, and educational realms of the country. I was fortunately allowed to mention such things in class, unlike a few ETAs who tried to do the same and received phone calls forbidding politics to be discussed in school. In fact, our lessons happened to coincide with history lessons, in which a recent assignment was to interview someone from the communist era. During these discussions, the students played more the role of the teacher, and I played more the role of the student. When they speak more than I do, I deem it a successful exchange.

It was in this way that we became emotionally invested and learned from one other. While it is important to be professional, you have to remember that you are dealing with *real people*. One of the challenges of being a teacher is being able to successfully engage in the process of empathy. It is not good enough to be smart, to know all the different facets of knowledge—you have to be able to communicate that knowledge. And you can't do that without imagining what it's like to be the receiver of knowledge. Success is not achieved in conclusions, it is achieved in progress. And without attempting to connect, that is impossible.

I can't remember the exact derivations for momentum equations, but I can remember the positive otherworldly influence my high school physics teacher had on us. I wanted to be like that. I did not merely want to skim the surface, I want-

ed to exchange genuinely. That was one of my main goals: to cross paths with these students, connect with them, offer some new ideas and perspectives, and leave them with something to lastingly think about, just as they've done for me.

The resulting discussions are as colorful as the memories. Attending Z's volleyball matches. Exposing P and R to new forms of music that they have never heard before. Applauding M's boyish haircut, while the rest of her classmates bemoaned it. Admiring T's drawing abilities and asking what inspires her. Successfully working with A so that the school now has a video chat date with the International Space Station in 2016, even if A will have graduated by then. Learning about how L and N have to live at home alone, while their parents work abroad; or how B hasn't received word from his father in ages. Influencing E's regard for size acceptance. Walking and talking with P as the rest of his classmates run on, as he is hindered by leg problems, and then later, attempting to visit him as he recovers in a hospital. Giggling about Fitzgerald and his 20s Parisian crew with G at our usual café. Encouraging V's Arduino projects and programming skills. Sitting in on a literature class and having Y translate the entire class to me. Listening to S talk about the woes of having to leave the country eventually, when she very much wishes that she and everybody else could stay.

This collage of people, conversations, and events continues. When you really think about it, it is quite astounding that our lives happened to intersect like that. My decision to apply for a Fulbright had actually occurred after the university's given deadline, and I remember rushing into the office, accompanied by a benevolent dean, and telling the fellowship advisor I wanted to go somewhere, anywhere, perhaps a place that wasn't especially thought of in our everyday lives, but had important lessons, special meanings, and true heart. I found that place in the faces of those at Geo Milev. I know that returning to New Jersey will be psychologically displacing for a moment. Being back in my home environment will probably feel odd and leave me with the sensation that all of this—these people, these places, these things—seem so far away in an alternate world. But it is impossible to be unaffected and not have had my eyes opened by all that has taken place these past ten months. And for that, I am truly, truly thankful.

**Disclaimer:** *The text is published in its original and unedited version.*