



## **The Duty of My Generation**

How American and German High School Students  
Work Towards Changing The World

written for CertiLingua®

[REDACTED]  
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## I. Motivation

“It is you, the young and fearless at heart, the most diverse and educated generation in our history, who the nation is waiting to follow.”

~ Former President Barack Obama

I chose this quote as the introduction to my project documentation because it accurately describes what motivated me to start my intercultural encounter project about the experiences I have gained in an international debating club. The former President of the United States calls my generation to become aware of the fact that we will be the presidents, leaders, politicians of tomorrow. We will be the generation changing the world someday and in order to be able to do so, we have to learn about the most influential topics of today. These topics do not only contain economic improvements or environmental agreements, but especially major social issues like the arising conflicts due to discrimination towards minorities.

However only being educated about the subject areas politics, economies, social and environmental issues is not enough, they have to be actively discussed and questioned to manage improvements one day. The bilingual debating club at my school - “Gymnasium [REDACTED]” in [REDACTED] - offers the opportunity to fulfil this purpose. It is the place where my intercultural project started to begin with, and it is a safe space, where everyone, no matter their age or English language skills, has the chance to give their very own view on current topics.

Being the daughter of an English teacher and a journalist made me realize at a very young age that just talking about issues concerning other countries is hazardous as you might inadvertently tell a one-sided story. In order to reduce this risk, it is crucial to make international experiences and to widen ones horizon with the help of understanding point of views of people abroad. As Mr. Obama states, my generation is called to be the most diverse one, particularly this means that especially debating on a global scale and understanding the point of views of all kind of people is the key to a successful leadership of the future.

Up until last year, I was convinced that I could experience these cross-cultural exchanges of opinions through various debate events. At the beginning of March 2020 we prepared ourselves for the upcoming *Model United Nations, Lower Rhine*, which simulates a United Nations debate, separated into several committees that would have taken place at the [REDACTED] castle in NRW on March 14, 2020. The day before, on March 13 the government announced a nationwide lockdown due to the outbreak of a highly infectious virus called COVID-19.

Suddenly, the whole world found itself inside their homes, having the least amount of inter-human contacts as possible. How did our debating club cope with the impossibility of meeting face-to-face? We took advantage of the technological possibilities and moved from our class room to an online conference.

### **I.A. Description of the Project**

A good friend of mine, who is a dedicated member of the debating club as well, had the idea which eventually led to this intercultural project. At the beginning of September 2020, he contacted his former friends from his year abroad in Wayland, a city in central Michigan (Allegan County), in the United States of America. These young students are eager participants of the debating club of their school, the Wayland Union High School, similar to our Gymnasium [REDACTED]. We simply asked them whether they would be engaged to join our online sessions.

After the organizational details had been settled, we had our first meeting on September 26, 2020. Finally, there we were: a heterogeneous group of young people between the ages of 14 and 18, with a set of unique personalities. Some of us who were about to graduate from school and had a clear plan of their lives in mind, others who dreamed of traveling, and still others who were in the midst of personality change, but all of us with the willingness to debate passionately about what was on our minds. And that is precisely the intention behind our debating sessions. For several hours, we outline global issues and present our proposed solutions. Very often, this leads to lively discussions, such as when we talked about the US presidential election a few months ago. During this discussion, a conflict that some Americans had with their parents was revealed. Since it was the first time for many of the older U.S. student participants they were allowed to vote, some who lived in more conservative and religious households debated with their families whether they should vote for Trump or Biden. The students themselves all agreed that they would vote for Biden, actively distancing themselves from their families' political stances. I was genuinely outraged that their parents were thinking in such a one-dimensional way in this regard, as many of them simply voted for the Republican candidate out of habit. Thereby, they were not concerned with the candidate per se, but with upholding a "tradition".

Having finished our first debate, it was already clear to me that this intercultural acquaintance would be the heart of my CertiLingua project.

The lively discussions around political, societal, and social topics gave me a deep insight into American culture. While we all technically sat separately in our rooms at home, we formed a

social community online. This gave us the opportunity to fulfil our generation's duty to exchange ideas about today and tomorrow's matters of a globalized world.

In the process, three topics have become particularly important to me, which is why I have placed the emphasis of this CertiLingua project on them, namely gender equality, the LGBTQ+ community and the US presidential election of 2020.

Precisely these focal points have made me aware of what the core question of my project is: to what extent do we educate ourselves as representatives of our generation, in order to become clear about what the world should look like at some point, with us as its leaders? The current pandemic in particular is putting obstacles in our way; but nonetheless, we are now at the age of learning the values we need for life. Values like freedom and justice are currently closed to many children, could it be that we have found a way to overcome this barrier? Specifically, will my intercultural project broaden not only my horizons, but also those of the American members of the debate club? I would like to work out exactly that, and especially to explore the differences between young people of one generation from two different parts of the world. In that regard, the idea of intercultural encounter is a key element of this project, since these international meetings with the Americans show that even though we are separated by a whole ocean, we all have the dream of one day living in a society that looks at women the same way as men, that accepts all forms of love, and that is not divided by political tensions. These discussions got the ball rolling for me; they have clearly shown that people of our age all over the world are thinking about how the future must be improved. Thereafter, we all thought more and more often about what is actually happening right now, with us, with our generation locked up in our rooms. These seemingly simple organized encounters allowed us to afford space for our thoughts. Thoughts about hope for the future, especially hope that one day conflicts about inequality and discrimination will stop. This rolling ball became bigger and bigger during the meetings, as the exchange with the Americans showed me that indeed there are people who want the world to change, who take gender equality and the right to love anyone of any gender, for granted. And also the Americans have become increasingly aware of this opportunity and have shared their feelings as well. They revealed that they had also felt left alone when it comes to women's rights. An American girl claimed, "In the media and in everyday life, women still get sexualized and objectified a lot more than men are. It starts with trying to regulate how they dress and doesn't even end with blaming them for being raped". By her facial expression, I could tell she was furious at this demeaning treatment. I supported her with stating that "the government wants to protect the situation with 'protecting women' but not by educating men".

Another boy expressed his fear of talking about his sexuality publically. He was frustrated about how “It’s harder to get someone to love something than to get someone to hate it”.

In conclusion, the idea of meeting in my project plays one of the most important roles in our lives amidst the pandemic: to open new doors, to begin listening and understanding. As one of my new American friends stated: "We are all in this together", and indeed, it is true, how often does it happen that the whole world is experiencing the exact same situation? But that is not the only point the quote refers to, as when one of my new friends is discriminated against, teased, or made fun of, it affects me personally as well. Through this project, I would like to offer an opportunity to get everything off one's chest, because that is exactly what I am using this project for.

### **I.B. Personal View on the Project**

Thinking about what I could choose as a project for my CertiLingua work, I was frustrated at first, for the pandemic had closed many opportunities to participate in an intercultural exchange. Then, after I joined a private online meeting with the Americans, which for me went late into the night due to the time difference, I suddenly realized that I was already part of an extraordinary international experience. Hence, the project rather fell into my hands, considering me not only being a member of an international debating club, but also part of a unique group of friends. The very fact that something like this could develop only through videoconferencing still astounds me today.

Our debates became more and more lively, especially on controversial topics, and continued outside the regular sessions. As an example, we had a vigorous discussion about whether gun ownership in the U.S. should be regulated more. In the course of this, two groups did indeed form among the Americans. One girl clarified: "I just don't feel safe when going outside at night. Who knows how many crazy people are wandering around?" This was provocative to other members of the debate, who felt that it was their proper right to defend themselves. Personally, I supported the girl's opinion, because violence can never be the solution to crime. In a sense, I was shocked that even people my age, who like me believe in love and peace, were yet convinced that everyone should be allowed to own a gun. Nevertheless, I began wondering what the motives of the opponents of gun control were. Was their desire for safety perhaps even understandable to a certain extent?

I ultimately chose this project for two reasons. One from an educational perspective, as it provided an incredible opportunity to share ideas about global conflict issues. It has helped me to experience firsthand subjects that I have gone over as theoretical models in school

classes, such as the still present American Dream, or to generally rethink topics such as the U.S. election with the help of the American point of view.

On the other hand, this project is truly meaningful to me since these people have shaped my personality with their humor and appreciation. I was excited to write down my experiences with these young adults, who I have come to value as dear friends.

Considering what I expect from this project, several aspects immediately come to mind. First of all, I personally expect to improve my English skills through this intercultural encounter, not only by expanding my subject-specific vocabulary in relation to my "school English," but also, and especially, by learning American colloquial language so I will be able to speak it even more fluently in the future.

Most importantly, I have the idea that through debating precisely my key subjects, we can use the perspective of another culture to think about solutions that hadn't occurred to us before. For example, how do these young adults feel about gender equality? Are they perhaps even actively fighting for it? How is the LGBTQ+ movement presented in American culture? What are their aspirations for how our generation will one day open the doors to a united world? And how do current events, like the election of the American president affect their lives compared to our lives here in Germany?

Through this project, I expect to find out differences in relation to these very questions between young people of one age from two different countries, but also similarities that may even be surprising.

### **I.C. Educational Context of the Project**

My intercultural project as such takes place within the debating club of the Gymnasium [REDACTED] and therefore belongs to the extracurricular program of my school. Additionally, the project can be linked to various aspects of the curriculum of North Rhine-Westphalia for English classes.

The topic of Globalization is one of the most addressed ones of the English curriculum. To explain the reasons for this we have to take a look at our current time and what the possible interactions between different nations are. A flight from Germany to Michigan would take exactly 8 hours and 23 minutes over a distance of 6.704 kilometers<sup>1</sup>. Today, a call from Germany to someone in Michigan has a maximum delay of 3 seconds. In other words, we live in a globalized world which is stately becoming smaller as the possibilities to travel from one place to another are getting increasingly easier. The question that might occur now is why

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.luftlinie.org/Michigan/Deutschland> (22.02.2021, 15:23)

globalization affects especially the youth. First of all, the United Nations defines globalization “as the global integration of economies and societies”<sup>2</sup>. With my generation in particular, we seem to have a close connection to our globalized world, economic- as well as cultural-wise. Due to the high level of education of new information technologies the younger generation lives in a world without any limits concerning interacting on a global scale via the internet. Especially the subtopic Studying and Working in a Globalized World can be found in my project, since we use these recent technical advances to work together on solutions for global conflicts.

My intercultural project shows how far such interactions can go. Although we have never met face-to-face before, we became friends via online video sessions. Moreover, we as an international debating club are another example for the influence of globalization on the youth: activism. This was particularly evident from the passion with which we discussed together. Each of us has been already to an activism demonstration, either for equality, climate change or human rights. There is even the official term "youth activism" for the combative spirit of our generation. As Jakob Nehls of the Amnesty Youth Council notes, "My generation has experienced an activism explosion in the past year".<sup>3</sup>

Globalization cannot be characterized as only a positive development, as its consequences affect especially those who are not part of it. The task for our generation now is to find solutions for these issues. As we will be the next generation dealing with the governance of the world's countries you cannot start too early with informing yourself and dispute with others. At this point, the debate club comes into the pictures. There we discuss major global issues like for example global justice, sustainable development, climate change and social equality. Following the example set by original debate structures from the United Nations and the European Parliament, we learn to have every different aspect from these topics in mind and to present solutions for them in an open way with other students who are willing to find compromises.

In particular, I address the topics of gender equality, the LGBTQ+ community, and the U.S. election in my project. While the first two of these are directly linked to globalization, the last topic focuses on a distinct aspect: the relevance of the American dream to the present. This is indeed reflected in the behavior of the Americans regarding the election and their ideas about an ideal president. In fact, when I asked the Americans about their idea of what a president

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.un.org/development/desa/youth/globalization-wpay> (22.02.2021, 15:51)

<sup>3</sup> ["Meine Generation hat eine Aktivismus-Explosion durchlebt" | Amnesty International](#) (10.04.2021, 18:45)



should be like, keywords such as "conscious of freedom", "a role model", in other words, a president for the people, immediately came up. In this respect, the aspect of freedom was very important for the Americans, since they wanted a president who appreciates and represents the values of every individual. They dream of change. All of these suggestions came up in my English lessons when we talked about the American dream and are proof that it definitely is still relevant.

Certainly, the linguistic aspect of the project should not be disregarded. Since we use English for all our meetings, whether the official debates or private meetings, we unconsciously implement the principle of a lingua franca. This topic is also reflected in the subject of globalization. With English being considered the lingua franca of the Western World today, and therefore the main language of communication, it is of major importance to continuously improve one's language skills. Debating in English offers the chance to learn vocabulary to all kinds of lexical fields. You gain knowledge of formal discussion phrases from debates of the United Nations along with a general understanding of talking about global issues.

## **II. Realization of the Project**

### **II.A. Factual Description of the Implementation of the Project**

My project involving the American students from Allegan County, Michigan, USA, started on September 26, 2020 with a meet and greet session. On that day, the German debating club, including me met with the American students online via Zoom – a piece of software for video conferencing. Our ██████████ Debate Club, like the Wayland Union High School club, consists of about 16 students between the ages of 15 and 18. This meeting served as a first rapprochement of the two groups and everyone had the opportunity to introduce themselves. This event was followed by private meetings intended primarily for the purpose of entertainment. These private meetings included, for example, birthdays that were celebrated via Zoom and to which I was invited. We all sat separately at home, but were able to be together online and play games. On one of those birthdays, we stayed on the video conference for over seven hours talking about our lives. As an example for relevant topics, one girl had been diagnosed with COVID-19 shortly before and we talked about her fears of becoming severely ill, but also about her relief about being vaccinated soon. In fact, in America, teenagers (16+) are already being vaccinated. I then also shared my worries, as everything runs slower here in Germany and that I was unsure when my life would become more or less normal again.

Nevertheless, optimistic topics were addressed as well. One boy proudly shared his experiences regarding his own homosexuality, including relationships, discrimination, and acceptance. I took the chance, encouraged him and expressed my admiration that he had had the courage to come out.

Then on October 19, 2020, we had our first official discussion on the topic of differences between Americans and Germans. At this two-hour meeting, we used Zoom's so-called breakout rooms, allowing us to divide the large group into several small groups of about 6 participants, consisting of half Germans and half Americans. This gave everyone the chance to be part of the conversation. Commonly, a person begins to present their opinion to others. Already during that exchange, there were clear diversities regarding the relevance and presentation, for instance via social media, of gender equality and LGBTQ+. After the official discussion, most of the attendees stayed for a private meeting, which eventually lasted another 2 hours, making it go on late into the night for us Germans. During this time, the conversation kept returning to the varying strengths of activism among our generation in Germany and America. Amazing insights came together, as the Americans, for example, had never heard of the "Fridays For Future" climate movement. Although this movement was so prominent here in Europe, it apparently had no significance whatsoever in the USA. In contrast, the LGBTQ+ movement was significant among these American students and was regularly talked about and promoted by them on social media.

From then on we met regularly at least three times a month for various official discussions, but especially in private as for instance, we held a private meeting to collectively watch and discuss Biden's very first speech as the newly elected U.S. President to be, at the time of the U.S. election. What may not be immediately obvious here is the time difference. While it was a pleasant 9 p.m. for the Americans, it was already 3 a.m. for me here, and yet I would never have wanted to sleep through that experience. As soon as Biden began, our conversation fell silent; we all listened intently. You could feel the excitement that was not only among the Americans, but also within me. There, in front of the camera, was this man who meant so much more to all of us than just his position as the next president of the United States; in the expression of my American friends, I sensed relief, hope and, above all, pride. How we all had tears of emotion in our eyes as the president spoke, "I pledge to be a president who seeks not to divide but to unify, who doesn't see red states and blue states, only sees the United States". It was so surprising to see that we had all watched America's development with concern in the past, and I felt the connection I had developed on an emotional level with my friends.

A debating session via zoom proceeds as follows. We always meet with our cameras turned on so everyone can speak as if they would under normal circumstances.

After having agreed on a topic beforehand, for example “Stereotypes in Germany and the US” we prepare ourselves by researching arguments. This broad topic in particular led to a lively discussion. The Americans shared their views on how they imagine Germans to be, naming character traits such as neatness and humorlessness, among others. I was soon able to refute both of these stereotypes using my personal examples, as there was no one in my social circle who was overly neat or punctual, nor did I know anyone who was surprisingly un-humorous.

During the discussion, I also presented how harmful I think it is to view an entire nation according to a handful of characteristic. Of course, in the case of humorlessness, it wasn't too serious, but as soon as we got to speaking about prejudices against Americans, this light-heartedness was no longer the case. Mainly the international media presence of former President Trump led to his character traits being transferred to the whole country. Among them, for example, racism and arrogance, both of which absolutely do not apply to my American friends. We also discussed the idealized model of American patriotism and came to the conclusion that of course Americans are proud of their origins and believe that they can achieve a lot. However, I feel the same way about Germany. We agreed that we were all individuals and that a nation should not be limited to single character traits.

On March 2, 2021, we met up to participate in a Model United Nations debate on the topic of COVID vaccination, which meant debating formally with clauses and as representatives of nations. Four days later, the American debate style was on the agenda. We wrote, delivered, and questioned acts and speeches on issues such as "Sanction Jurisdictions Where LGBTQ+ People are Criminalized" and on the "Promot[ion of] Gender Equality".

In addition to the active debates, I asked the American students to participate in a survey I created, and to share the answers with me in a video conference. The questions were related to my project's key issues and included questions like: "How is the conflict about gender equality tackled among your friends/family/country?", "Imagine being a teacher, how would you teach about the LGBTQ+ community?", and "Would you personally say that tradition and religious faith play a role when voting for a new president?" In the video conference that followed, the Americans shared their thoughts on this and also listened to me when I explained, for example, that elections in Germany do not really have anything to do with religious faith or tradition, since there is, after all, a greater choice of options and the parties adapt their election programs to the needs of the population each time anew.

## **II.B. Connection of the Intercultural Question with the Course of the Project**

The question I developed in the preparation of the project was to what extent my generation, despite the current pandemic, was fulfilling its duty and continuing to come up with ideas to be able to solve global crises and conflicts in the future. My intercultural encounter project is based exactly on this question, since we, as a debating club, have precisely this task. However, what is even more special about my project is that we do not only come together as a debating club, but also as friends. And that is the decisive factor for this duty, namely to completely detach ourselves from school or from other expectations and to start this process of thinking on our own about what we can contribute to society as individuals.

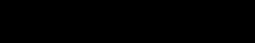
With the help of this previously developed question, I used the opportunity given to me and paid attention to the attitudes and thoughts of the Americans. Already at the beginning of the project, the need to talk about global crises was noticeable, especially the current frustration resulting from continuous lockdowns. Yet, we weren't just sad about not being able to see our friends or about having to cancel various graduation parties or class trips. We were downright angry at the governments of the countries of this world that had allowed such a development in the first place. As a debating club, however, we knew that anger alone would not lead to a solution, which is why we began to discuss the issue constructively in the form of UN debates. Solutions such as strict lockdowns over two months or patent-free vaccinations were proposed, supported or rejected.

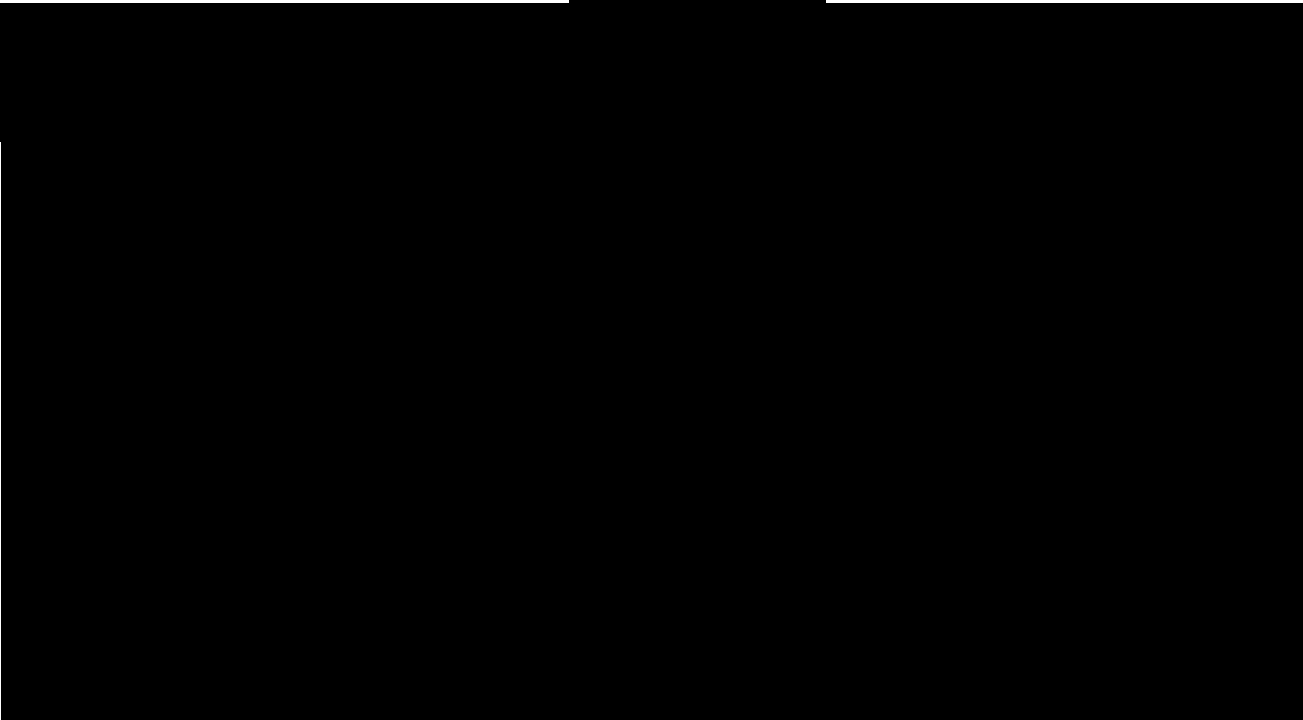
The COVID debate didn't stop there; I was also relieved to have the opportunity to talk about conflict issues that are currently drowned out by the media coverage of the pandemic. After all, People today are still discriminated against because of their sexuality, and especially now, when there are few opportunities to seek support or meet people who are experiencing the same conflict, innovative ideas are of paramount importance. Maybe you can't meet face to face at the moment, but we haven't let that deter us from finding solutions for people who feel left alone. Even if we don't change the world through these debates yet, we are still influencing a small part of our generation and who knows, maybe one day one of us will be in an actual governmental position. Nevertheless, what this question has shown above all is that we don't need political power at all to implement our ideas and thoughts. For example, on International Women's Day, we used the social media platform Instagram to advocate for equality. We shared the theses we had previously put forward in the video conferences about the gender pay gap or child marriage, for example, online and used them to educate our followers.

My question is formulated that general because it represents all the questions that came up during the project. Each time we started discussing a topic, new questions about the project came up, in this case, for example, what we can do personally to fight for equality. Other questions included how sexuality and the LGBTQ+ community are treated in Germany and America. We talked about this not only formally, but also privately, as one girl had her rainbow flag proudly hanging on the wall in the background. It was the first time for me that someone in my age with whom I had contact showed her attitude to it so publicly and I was honestly amazed about it. Of course, my friends here in Germany are also supportive of the issue, but it was never really talked about. It was only through this intercultural encounter that I realized that it should be addressed, which is why I took it as one of the main topics for the project as well. The Americans thus fulfilled part of their duty by bringing it to my attention.

Also during the presidential election, new intercultural issues came up, especially concerning the international relevance of the election result. Since the topic does not appear in the German curriculum, I spoke about it only briefly in English class, even though it was one of the most important events internationally at the time. Therefore, I made use of the opportunity to ask the Americans personally about their opinions on the election. This gave me an insight into the thoughts of people who actually experienced this election and not only the theories that news channels represented and spread. They shared their concerns about the future of their country and also the conflicts they had, for example, with other students who disagreed politically. Before I knew the Americans, I was relatively sure that people my age were to a large extent against Trump, simply for the reason that that was the case here in my environment. Through the Americans, however, it became clear to me that, first of all, there were also young Trump supporters and secondly that they could also have plausible reasons for this. For example, the Americans told me that some of their classmates feel understood by Trump because he is not a politician. This encounter broadened my perspective on the debate and illustrated both perspectives to me.

### III. Reflection and Retrospection

Cf. video "Reflection and Retrospection – 



M 1 Meeting with the debating club

### IV. Outlook

The project benefited me in many regards: From a scholastic point of view, I was able to put my English skills to the test. This will also help me in the future when I have to use English in my studies or at work. In the many conversations, the difference between "school English" and actual spoken English (in this case, American English of the Midwest) became clear to me, both in terms of pronunciation and vocabulary. In particular, many idiomatic phrases used by Americans my age were taught to me first hand by the students in Allegan. In this way, the knowledge I gained in my English classes dovetailed with the reality of spoken English in the United States. I will draw very practical lessons from this for my further use of the English language.

Nevertheless, the project not only improved my language skills - in times of the pandemic, when traveling is not possible, I was able to gain insights into the lives of Americans of the same age via video conferencing. This will make it easier for me in the future when I will have to deal with people from the English speaking world. My horizon was broadened by various aspects: I gained a great deal of experience from the reality of people's lives in the USA. Some examples: we discussed a lot about the U.S. presidential election, thus I have now and in the future first-hand information from time and eye witnesses who followed the events directly on site. Another example: Allegan's neighboring county of Kalamazoo is home to

Pfizer's largest factory, where much of BioNTech's vaccines, destined for the U.S. market, are produced. This was also a hotly debated topic between the American and German students, as to how this vaccine should be distributed. LGBTQ+ issues also played a major role, where it also became apparent that American and German ways of looking at things are very different. In the U.S., this topic is dealt in a much more outspoken way. The LGBTQ+ community feels less marginalized than in Germany; in the US, they feel a far greater sense of pride in being part of this community, although they also face a lot of public discrimination.

I hope that it is possible to implement some of this outspoken spirit in Germany as well. One lesson I learned was to look at social, economic, and political aspects of life with a more open, worldly view. The exchange helped me to break out of the bubble of my mindset. I expect that this change of perspective will enable me to permanently broaden my horizon. And conversely, we probably succeeded in giving our friends in Allegan an insight into our way of thinking and living.

I look forward to continuing this exchange after our school years are over. We older students in Germany are now graduating from high school and will then study or do an apprenticeship. The American friends will start their college careers after the summer, spread all over the USA. Thanks to the technical possibilities of video conferencing, however, it will be easy to stay in touch. I hope that we will succeed in this. After all, the Debating Club should have a long-lasting impact and help to strengthen international understanding and show that there are channels of conversation across the Atlantic on many levels. There has been a lot of talk in the news about radio silence and miscommunication in transatlantic dialogue during the Trump administration. Projects like ours show that understanding is possible even in times of political chill - because communication between countries is not limited to those in power, but has its foundation in grassroots movements like ours.