

Interview and Portrait of our Teaching Assistant 2020 / 21 DIONNE AGAWU



- 1) Dionne, you have an interesting cultural background. Can you tell us where your parents come from, where you grew up, and where you lived before you came to Austria.

"My family comes from Ghana, a country in West Africa. They moved to London in the 90s, and I was born there. However, when I was young, we moved to the US, where I have spent most of my life. Most of my time was spent in Texas, but during my university years, I lived in many different states and had the opportunity to travel quite a bit to others."

- 2) What did you study for your Bachelor, and where? What was your motivation to pursue exactly this study?

"I completed my bachelor's at Bryn Mawr College in Bryn Mawr, which is a small town close to Philadelphia in Pennsylvania. I studied German and Anthropology there. My motivation for studying German actually began years earlier, even before high school. I had the pleasure of growing up in a tight knit circle of friends from different cultural backgrounds, an experience that has impacted many aspects of my life. A particular friend from Germany offered me the chance to stay with her and her family for a few weeks over the summer in Baden-Württemberg when I was 14. I had never travelled alone before, but I enjoyed the experience so much that it motivated me to study German. I also studied Anthropology because I find other people and cultures fascinating. I always want to learn more about how others live and what they hold as important."

- 3) What did you study for your Master, and where? What motivated you to indulge in that study?

"I completed my master's degree in German Studies at California State University, Long Beach. I enjoy learning about the German language and German speaking cultures and wanted to continue doing it. I also thought that the knowledge of different cultures could help me in the future."

4) What was the trigger to apply at Fulbright to become a teaching assistant?

"Teaching is a beautiful opportunity to connect with others, learn information, and discover new things. Working as a teaching assistant allows me to get to know others and share something about my own background and experiences. I believe that this sort of communication is essential if one wants to bring together people and foster cross-cultural connections. Already during my time here so far, I have had the honor to meet many people from many different backgrounds, and these encounters have enriched my life in many ways. I have enjoyed getting to share not only my American side, but the Ghanaian part of my background as well."

5) What did you teach in the winter semester 2020? What were the reactions of the students?

"In the winter semester, I taught with Dr. Hilda Fanta and Prof. Mag Gabriele Isak in different teacher training courses, as well as an English Brush up course. I enjoyed this very much, and the students I spoke with seem to have enjoyed it as well. Additionally, I worked with some Erasmus students, which was a great opportunity to create connections with people from other European countries outside of Austria."

6) You worked with different professors at the University College of Teacher Education here in Klagenfurt. What are major differences in comparison to American colleges and universities?

"Although I had the privilege of attending universities in the US that treasure open communication and critical thinking, I have noticed that there are fewer "taboo" topics in Austria than in the US. For example, I was able to have stimulating conversations with students about many different divisive topics, such as politics, whereas if I were in the US, I might have avoided them."

7) What strikes you particularly different in Austria in comparison to the US?

"There are many small differences in Austria that seem insignificant, but that I did not expect, such as using coins to get shopping carts at the supermarket. I did not realize this would be a problem during my first trip, and ended up having to carefully balance everything in my arms while shopping! Another difference was the level of hospitality. Most Americans are extremely hospitable; however, they might invite you to their house out of niceness, and not because they expect you to actually show up. Here, I learned that many Austrians take such invitations seriously and will want you to really come over if they tell you."

8) You decided to apply for a second year as teaching assistant at the University College of Teacher Education? What was your thought behind?

"So far, I have had a marvelous experience, not only in Klagenfurt, but at the university as well. I have also had time to really consider my future path and what roles teaching and cross-cultural communication can play in it. Applying for a second year allows me to continue working in a job that I truly enjoy and continue building connections with people here."

9) You work at the Viktor Frankl Hochschule. What do you associate with Viktor Frankl?

"I did not know very much about Viktor Frankl before coming to Austria. Since I have been here, I have learned a bit about him and his inspirational life. I think his work related to meaning in life is very important, since what I want to do in the future has to do with helping people find meaning in their life, even if they live in horrible conditions."

10) What is your vision for the summer semester? What would be a personal goal for you?

"During the summer semester, I look forward to continuing classes. I would also like to perhaps offer a class of my own; something that connects learning and teaching with culture and discussing why exploring the differences between people can actually help bring them closer together."

Interview questions by Hilda Fanta

