

Tuebingen, December 2, 2023

## **“Ambassadors in Sneakers 2023 – A Young Leaders’ Transatlantic Summer Academy on Human Rights”**

“Ambassadors in Sneakers 2023” brought together 24 youth council members between the ages of 15 and 22 from Germany and the USA for a four-week transatlantic summer academy on human rights. The participants (twelve male and twelve female) qualified for the program through a competitive application process. Half of the cohort represented youth councils from all over Germany and the other half various schools, organizations, and councils from the American state of California. Together, they first spent one week in Tuebingen and one in Berlin (June 3–17, 2023) and later one week in Bakersfield, CA, and one in San Francisco, CA (July 29–August 12, 2023). During their travels, they met activists, contemporary witnesses, media representatives, and politicians with whom they explored the topic of human rights in order to learn from and with each other.

In **Tuebingen**, the participants met their “buddies” from the other country in person for the first time, having previously only communicated online. Together, they underwent extensive intercultural training and an introductory workshop on human rights run by Amnesty International. They spoke with Social Mayor Daniela Harsch about current challenges facing Tuebingen's city administration and with activist Nilima Zaman about intersectional feminism. During the visit to the Global Ethic Institute, human rights issues were discussed primarily in the context of globalization, and later, in dialogue with Fridays for Future activists, against the backdrop of climate change. At the group's “Youth Council Fair”, the participants presented the work of their youth committees and councils to each other and exchanged views on the differences and similarities of civic engagement in their respective home countries and communities. During a visit to the Amazon Development Center, they took a critical look at human rights issues in A.I. development. They had in-depth discussions about Germany's National Socialist past whilst meeting the country's Antisemitism commissioner, Michael Blume, and Cantor Nathan Goldman at the Stuttgart Synagogue.

Minister of Culture Theresa Schopper extended greetings from Minister-President Winfried Kretschmann, the patron of this year's Ambassadors in Sneakers program, and spoke to the group about equity in education. The conclusion of the Tuebingen part of the program was an event at which the participants had the opportunity to meet Ambassadors in Sneakers alumni who had taken part in previous years of the program since 2017. Political scientist Katika Kühnreich inspired critical thinking and discussion with her keynote speech on the social consequences of digitalization.

In **Berlin**, the group met prominent activists such as Gilda Sahebi (human rights in Iran), Justin Hayo (anti-racism work and change activism) and the duo Herr & Speer (gender equality and youth mobility). The meeting with the executive director of the RIAS Berlin Commission, American journalist Erik Kirschbaum, focused not only on the role of the media in protecting human rights, but also on cultural differences in the German and American understanding of freedom of expression and freedom of the press. The group visited the Jewish Museum and explored the history of escape attempts in the GDR at the Berlin Underworlds Museum. In addition, the “ambassadors in sneakers” met member of the Bundestag Gyde Jensen, former chairwoman of the Committee on Human Rights and Humanitarian Aid, as well as the Minister-Counselor for Public Affairs, Robert Greenan, at the U.S. Embassy. The conversation with Theresa Monaghan at the Federal Foreign Office was particularly exciting for many in the group: Ms. Monaghan, staff member for the Coordinator for Transatlantic Cooperation Michael Link, not only spoke about German-American relations but also provided information about her own career as a diplomat, as many in the group were very interested in Foreign Service.

After a six-week break, the Ambassadors in Sneakers met again in **Bakersfield**. The politically conservative oil and agriculture town did not conform to the typical California stereotypes that the German group was familiar with, but instead provided authentic insights into the reality of life for millions of people in the Central Valley of California. This also led to an intensive exchange with young people from the organization Transitional Youth Mobilizing for Change and with two local environmental activists who are drawing attention to the harmful effects of oil production on public health. Mayor Karen Goh was particularly keen to welcome the “Young Leaders” to her city in person. Journalist Leonel Martínez spoke about his reporting on human rights issues in the

community, the Deputy Superintendent of the Kern County School District, Lisa Gilbert, about the mental health of school students and city employee Nathan Gutierrez about his inclusion activism. Participants learned about the Open Door Network, which supports people experiencing houselessness, and Covenant Coffee, which promotes fair trade while empowering foster youth through on-the-job training. During a field trip to Manzanar, the site of a former concentration camp, many participants – even among the Californians – learned for the first time about the internment of thousands of Japanese Americans during World War II. Finally, a particularly impressive meeting took place with civil rights activist and Presidential Medal of Freedom recipient Dolores Huerta. She spoke about her eventful life, which was shaped by her commitment to the rights of farm workers. Ms Huerta encouraged the young people in their own local political engagement and gave them valuable advice on how to make change.

The Ambassadors in Sneakers spent the last week of the summer academy in **San Francisco**, where, in the venerable City Hall, they not only met representatives of the Youth Commission but also attended a session of the Human Rights Commission, which focused on potential reparations for African Americans in San Francisco. During a hop-on hop-off bus tour, the participants explored different parts of the city. They visited the LGBT Center and met representatives of the San Francisco Coalition on Homelessness as well as the Boys and Girls Club. Arndt Peltner, a journalist from Germany, explained the abuses in the U.S. penal system, which he is familiar with from numerous conversations with an inmate on death row at the notorious San Quentin prison. The young people discussed various ways of influencing public opinion and legislation with legislative advocate Cassie Mancini. Finally, they discussed the work of their respective youth committees with political advisor Shay Franco-Clausen. They not only received valuable insights on how to build and inspire community networks from her, but also developed concrete project ideas that they planned to implement in their home communities after the summer academy. The very emotional farewell of the German and American participants at the end of the summer academy emphasized the deep friendships that had developed during the intensive time spent together.

Ambassadors in Sneakers 2023 was the fifth transatlantic summer academy for young leaders the German-American Institute Tuebingen has organized in different cities and states since 2017.

One particular challenge for project coordination this year was the high need for third-party funding, caused not just by inflation and an unfavorable Euro-to-Dollar exchange rate, but also by the program's implementation on the U.S. West Coast, which resulted in higher flight costs. However, this was successfully offset by the fact that the program's connection to Baden-Wuerttemberg's state partnership with California opened up additional funding opportunities. Another special feature this year was the participation of two Ukrainian refugees, whose perspectives further enriched the intercultural dialogue and who repeatedly drew attention to human rights issues in connection with the Russian war of aggression against their homeland as well as the situation of refugees in Germany.

Despite the great success of Ambassadors in Sneakers, this year's Summer Academy was the last cycle until further notice, as our project funding through the German government's Transatlantic Program is limited until 2023. Although we have been able to gain many other small and medium-sized supporters of Ambassadors in Sneakers in recent years, without a strong main sponsor, it is unfortunately not possible for the GAI Tuebingen to run this extensive program again at the moment.

However, we are pleased that we have been able to strengthen transatlantic relations in the long term by intensively encouraging and empowering a total of 120 "young leaders" from Germany and the USA in their commitment to human rights over the course of the project years. The young people made deep friendships and brought new ideas, skills and networks back to their youth councils and youth parliaments.

We would like to thank all those responsible for the success of the program as well as the numerous sponsors, supporters and partners who made Ambassadors in Sneakers 2023 possible.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading 'Felix Weinmann'.

Felix Weinmann  
Deputy Director d.a.i. Tuebingen  
Project Leader *Ambassadors in Sneakers*

A handwritten signature in blue ink, reading 'Hannah Herrera'.

Hannah Herrera  
Trainee d.a.i. Tuebingen  
Project Coordinator *Ambassadors in Sneakers*

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Pictures:



*Dolores Huerta (Bakersfield)*



*San Francisco Youth Commission (San Francisco)*





*"Youth Council Fair:" poster presentations and discussion on youth participation in U.S. and Germany (Tuebingen)*



*Minister-Counselor for Public Affairs Robert Greenan (U.S. Embassy Berlin)*

## Feedback

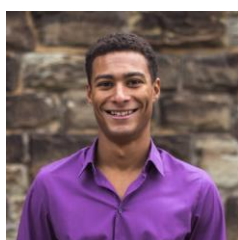


*"It was my pleasure to spend time with the Ambassador in Sneakers. The students' depth of knowledge about U.S. and local issues amazed me. I'm glad your team had the opportunity to engage with other local leaders, too."*

Karen Goh, Mayor of Bakersfield

*"Ambassadors in Sneaker has fundamentally changed my worldview. I am now getting more involved in human rights topics and actually just joined an organization fighting climate change. I would never have thought that the program would be so life- changing!"*

Maya (19) from Nuertingen, Baden-Wuerttemberg



*"Never in my entire career as an educator have I experienced a more honest and rewarding teaching and learning process. I am still grateful we were able to share it."*

Justin Hayo, Activist, Berlin

*We cannot thank you enough for organizing this wonderful program. We have all learned so much and met amazing people along the way!*

Lena (18) from Sunnyvale, California



*"This was such a positive experience for us and we appreciate the high level engagement and questions from the Ambassadors in Sneakers. Thank you for inviting us to your space to have these conversations in a room full of visionaries and passionate leaders."*

Juan Avila, COO Garden Pathways, Bakersfield

*It was inspiring to be with people my age who also want to make changes in the world. Meeting speakers who are passionate about human rights and the work they do was an unforgettable experience.*

Ny'Auri (19) from Bakersfield, California

