

## **The Mindsets of our Questions**

So far, I have visited 6 different classes in two different schools through the “Rent an American” program. I have become very good friends with the teacher who “rented” me for the very first time. Susanne teaches English and German to students between the ages of 10 and 18 years old. Her English is flawless and so is her Spanish. She has lived in England and Chile and has visited several Latin American countries more than once. She is fascinated with Latin American culture and requested an American to talk about illegal immigration in the United States.

I first became aware of the program through a presentation that was given to a group of 50 Californian students, which I am part of, who currently (August 2008-July 2009) study in Germany. I always thought that participating in the “Rent an American” program would be a great experience. However, I initially hesitated to take part since, technically, I am not an American. I migrated from Mexico to the United States about 5 years ago. During this time, I have learned about the way Americans live and think, I have attended American Colleges and Universities and I have met many of my very best friends. A part of me cannot help but to feel at least a little American and yet I have never experienced Christmas or Thanksgiving in the United States, I am not a big fan of baseball or football and although I followed McCain’s and Obama’s campaigns, I cannot vote in the United States. In other words, I felt unqualified to talk about American holidays, traditions, sports or politics. Right when I was about to give up on the program, Odila Triebel, the program director, forwarded me Susan’s request.

I met Susanne a day or two before my visit and together we prepared a class for a group of 12<sup>th</sup> graders. Later I visited what she called her brightest class: the 11<sup>th</sup> graders and more recently I visited her 10<sup>th</sup> graders. We basically did the same with the 10<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup>, and 12<sup>th</sup> classes. I would initially introduce myself and then they would do a short presentation. They had to write a short biography of an illegal immigrant. They took as a reference objects provided inside a bag by the teacher. The groups built their stories based on pictures, notes, and personal objects that belonged to their fictional characters. I commented on the accuracy of their speculations and tried to clarify their doubts.

The second part of the class consisted on a presentation about my experience as an immigrant in the United States. I told them how my dad, due to an incredibly high demand for bilingual teachers, was hired by the Los Angeles Unified School District in 1994 and how 5 years later he became a US citizen. I told them about my experience with the language and culture. I also shared with them other more shocking stories about people who cross the boarder illegally. After my presentation the students asked questions. Many of them prepared questions a week before my visit; however, many others were improvised right then.

I was very surprised that their questions were rather personal. Most of them did not address the topic directly. They would ask things such as: how much time did it take me to learn English, what I was doing in Germany, who I lived with in the US, how often I visited my family, etc... There was one question that always stuck out to me, particularly because it was the only question that every single class asked: have you ever been discriminated?

The fist time they asked me I really did not know what to say. I wanted to give an interesting answer but there was none. The answer was simply no. My best guess, as I explained them, was that Southern California is a very diverse place and therefore very tolerant of ethnic and religious differences. The second time I was asked this question, I was also unprepared. After a second or two of awkward silence, the student said the reason he asked was because he and his friends have experienced discrimination in Germany. The third time I was asked this question, I was able to remember a conversation I had with a very good friend of mine. He was a German exchange student in my hometown while we were still in High School. One time we had a very interesting conversation about globalization, imperialism, politics and economy. It was getting late and right before we called it a day, my friend ended the conversation with a comment along the lines of: "I am very lucky to be a white man." I did not know what to make out of that statement. There were just too many things implied. The class shouted "uuh!!" to express their disapproval. We then continued with more questions.

I have never been discriminated and, in my personal experience, this comment has been the only instance where I have deeply thought about the color of my skin and weather or not it makes a difference in my life. I feel very lucky that I have never been

through such a horrible experience as that of being discriminated. I sense that the student's curiosity might arise from what they have read or learned about the history of the United States (slavery, segregation, and the civil rights movement). Something similar happened to my friend while he spent a year abroad in Mexico. He was the German student who was constantly harassed with questions about Hitler. We would insatiably inquire about the Holocaust and the wars. It is needless to say that he found that annoying at the very least. Unfortunately, throughout my years of school in Mexico the War and the Holocaust were all we talked about when talking about Germany. Just like the students here, we did not mean to be intrusive, annoying or disrespectful... we were just curious.

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<http://www.rentanamerican.de>