

EXPERIENCING DIVERSITY

By Ashlee Hespen

FIRSTHAND

Ashlee Hespen, junior in public service and administration in agriculture from Conrad, Iowa, spent four months of 2010 as an exchange student at American University in Bulgaria. She blogged about her experience, and the following account is her entry for Feb. 23, 2010. For a link to her blog visit www.ag.iastate.edu/stories.



Photo: Lili Gavrilashka

Ashlee Hespen visits the Church of Annunciation in the oldest quarters of Blagoevgrad, the Bulgarian city that is home to American University.

Now that I've been here for a month and a half, I'm truly beginning to realize the diversity sitting right in front of me. American University in Bulgaria (AUBG) is more diverse than I could have ever imagined. Students from various countries across the world attend this private university of 1,000 students. In the main building, which previously hosted Soviet headquarters, hang the flags from all the countries, which have had students attend AUBG in the past and present. So far, I've met students from over 20 countries!

In the last week, I've taken the initiative to jump outside of the group of exchange students and spend time with full-time students. This past Friday, I was invited by a Bulgarian friend to join his group of friends. So I jumped right in to my greatest evening of diversity yet! There were about 20 students there, from Bulgaria, Serbia, Macedonia and a couple other countries.

This evening was so special because the friends took turn playing the guitar and singing songs from their own countries. It was so interesting to sit there and listen to the different music being played and feel the emotion of the music without understanding a single word. It was also neat because their languages are Slavic, so

they understand each other. And luckily enough, my friend was kind enough to translate the jokes and conversations for me. There were Serbian snacks shared throughout the night and it was peaceful as we listened to the Bistritsa River flow near us. During many of the songs, the whole group would join in and they also played a couple American songs.

In class the following Monday, we watched a video "A Class Divided," about Jane Elliot, an Iowa teacher who did an exercise with her third grade students shortly after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. It made me reflect on my life back home. Friday was probably the first time I've ever felt, even in the slightest way, a minority. Although there were times I couldn't understand anything going on, I was able to enjoy the company and experience a variety of new cultures.

I am so happy to have this study abroad experience in such a diverse setting and am looking forward to all there is to learn from my newly found Bulgarian friends, as well as all of the students I can befriend while I'm here. Each day, I appreciate the diversity even further and I'm looking forward to going home with a broader worldview! 