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Leadership Experience #1
MSMG 60150: Transformational Leadership Portfolio

Growing up in rural Pennsylvania, I had little opportunity to travel and rarely left my region of the country. It wasn't until I reached high school that I was presented with an opportunity to represent others and see the world. For the entirety of my junior year, I served as a Rotary Youth Ambassador and lived with three host families in Aarhus, Denmark, while attending a Danish-speaking school. As a representative of my American school, I was also tasked with interacting and building relationships with other exchange students from around the world who were also living in Denmark. I gave presentations to Rotary clubs and my fellow students about me and my experiences.

At 16 years old, I had never left the country, nor had I ever been away from my family for more than a week. I had little understanding of the culture I was now immersed in, and I was committed to representing where I was from in the best possible light to people who I could not yet understand or connect with. Despite the severe culture shock and steep language barrier, I quickly noticed aspects about myself and my culture in comparison to the Danish life I was learning to live.

In a broad sense, I began to understand the connections and similarities between these two cultures separated by over four thousand miles. I began to pick up on similar behaviors, like their passion for sports or their love for the holidays. More importantly, however, I began to pick up on *subtle* differences that began to shape my understanding of Danish culture at its most fundamental levels. From the beginning, I could see that the Danes love to bicycle - even in a bustling city of over 300 thousand people like Aarhus, men, women, and children fill the bike lanes more than cars populate the roads. Kids learn to ride in infancy so they can bike with

friends to school from an early age, and even the elderly ride a battery-supported bicycle. I soon came to understand how this relates to core tenants of the Danish way of life – being healthy and active, caring for your environment and community, and maintaining close connection with your family. Each of these values are like ones held by Americans, but the way it is expressed in Denmark is uniquely specific to the Danes and their culture. This discovery allowed me to better understand myself and how I am a product of my family and community culture. Furthermore, this experience allowed me to look at other parts of the world through a different lens. It allowed me to better understand human behavior in a completely different way than before because I knew first-hand how one's culture, experiences, and environment shape how each of us sees and experiences the world. With this knowledge at my disposal, interacting and connecting with this foreign culture was now much easier.

I took to the biking culture, and I learned the ways of the road alongside Danes. More importantly, I learned how to best communicate with the people. Danes have a reputation for being quiet and cold with little interest in talking to strangers. However, once I better understood my surroundings with a keen focus on typical behavior and unspoken norms, I realized that persona was false. In fact, most Danes are more than happy to help a visitor, and they tend to show excitement in those who express interest in their country. With the onus on me to strike up conversation, I was pushed to reach out and engage others first. This forced me out of my comfort zone and made me a much more social person. It greatly developed my networking skills, as I had to rely on my ability to build relationships to make friends, complete my duties, and get the most out of this once-in-a-lifetime experience. It wasn't until I took the time to observe and notice these cultural behaviors before I realized how to best behave and was able to act accordingly.

This moment in my life was extremely significant to my development towards the end of my high school career. My constant networking and communication with others led me to pursue a major in public relations where I could help to connect businesses with their target audience while making meaningful, mutually beneficial relationships. My experience as a youth ambassador taught me the fundamental similarities and differences between people that arise solely based on where you are from. This lesson was crucial to my development not only as a communicator, but also as a member of any organization.

In the business world or a classroom setting, we are always collaborating with others whose thoughts and behaviors stem from their own past experiences as well. This role as an ambassador radically shaped my perception of myself and allowed me to better understand the greater scope of human behavior. We tend to look at situations through our own narrow lens which is shaped through our own personal experiences and perspectives we each develop over time. It is easy to forget the perspectives of others – especially those who we are completely unfamiliar with. I had the chance to experience the world through a different lens in the context of a leadership position. This will serve me well as a future leader of an organization, where I will undoubtedly be tasked with forming relationships and accounting for the impact my decisions will have on other stakeholders. As a leader, we are constantly in positions to organize, rally, and guide others towards a common goal. If a leader simply brings their own lens of the world to the table, it will undoubtedly alienate those who see challenges from a different perspective and leave out potential opportunities. It is the *duty* of a leader to consider various backgrounds, understandings, and cultures of those they lead while also seeking out opportunities to diversify the group. My experience as a leader in Denmark presented this duty to me, and it is a role that I carry with me as a leader in the working world.