

PERSONAL STATEMENT

Daniel M. Lofaro, Croatia, Electrical and Computer Engineering in Robotics

Prior to 2008 I did not like to travel. I did not see the use in it, and to be honest I was scared or the world being a dangerous place. My foreign language skills at the time were mediocre at best. I was afraid that if I went overseas to do research I would have trouble understanding people and them me. The is the story of my life changed and why I believe that international travel and collaboration is key to personal and professional growth and success. Before I start the story I must inject that: (1) To put it lightly I have a love of all and anything that is robots and will do almost anything to work with them. (2) My advisor Dr. Paul Oh, whom fully and completely trust, had just put me on the National Science Foundation (NSF) project grant PIRE where I am the primary caretaker full-size humanoid robot Jaemi HUBO (a dream come true).

In the fall of 2007 my Dr. Oh pushed me to apply for a NSF-EAPSI fellowship. The NSF-EAPSI would allow me to travel to S. Korea and work in the HUBO Lab at the Korean Advanced Institute of Science and Technology (KAIST). In Dr. Oh's opinion this was a required part of my studies if I were to work with HUBO, thus because of my love of robotics and my position in the NSF-PIRE had to apply. This is because at KAIST I would learn all there is to know about the HUBO robot. In my mind there was one problem with applying to the NSF-EAPSI, I might get it. This would mean I have to go to a dangerous place on the brink of war, S. Korea. I was scared. I ended up receiving the fellowship and reluctantly travelled to S. Korea spent my entire summer of 2008. This was the summer that changed my life in the best of ways!

By the time I arrived in Seoul Intl. airport (Incheon Intl.) I had already come to the realization that I would not be returning to the U.S. until the coming fall. I would have to make the best of a situation that I "thought" was bad. As I toured S. Korea, met the locals and worked with the members of the HUBO Lab I came to the realization that I was the luckiest man in the world. As the days from my arrival turned into weeks I had formed a close Korean friend base. We would play basketball together, go to the bar and norebong (Korean karaoke) and talk about what apparently all young men talk about, girls. I learned that Koreans are not as different from American as I thought. An important lesson that I learned is that the easiest, and most fun, way for a guy learn a new language is to go to dinner with a girl. When you are trying to impress someone (a girl) you really put your mind to learning conversational Korean. This made collaboration with HUBO Lab a breeze. In addition only were my lab-mates very motivated and smart, our skill sets also complement each other. It ended up being the perfect match (also why I believe we are successful).

By the end of my stint in S. Korea I have learned that the world is not as scary and dangerous as I thought. It is a fun, interesting and beautiful place filled with rich culture that I just needed to explore. The bubble that I lived in had been popped and now I am ready to take on the world. I proceeded to go back to S. Korea multiple times for collaboration work, conferences, invited talks and other events with my new found friends and collaborators. Because of my spectacular experience with S. Korea I sought out other research opportunities abroad. One pertinent example was working for the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). While organizing this workshop I was able to correspond with researchers from all over the world including Prof. Zdenko from University of Zagreb (he taught me Bela, a Croatian card game which I play with my friends in the U.S. to this day). From that relationship a member of Prof. Zdenkos lab, Matko, came to my lab for a Fulbright in 2011-12. Now the logical next step (and my much desired choice) is to return the favor and go to Prof. Zdenko's lab for Fulbright.

International travel and collaboration changed my life for the better. Its importance professionally and socially are immeasurable. When my bubble was popped and I joined the world, I learned and became a better man for it. Fulbright will allow me to continue to learn and grow in ways I can only do now, while I am young, through work and play.