

Wilson Sink – Summer 2015

I used to say that joining Chi Psi was the best choice I've made at Carolina.

After this summer, I can no longer speak with such certainty.

The Burch Study Abroad Program transformed my college experience. From a strictly academic and intellectual perspective, I have never had any course that so directly aligned with my personal interests and ambitions.

Ever since I was little, backpacking in the Appalachians with my dad, I have had a passion for nature and the environment. That passion expressed itself in scouts, in politics, in classes and clubs; it's been a sub-theme throughout my life.

But in Spain and Germany, I finally realized just how much I care. I finally realized just how much the environment matters to me. I finally realized, or perhaps confirmed, how I want to spend my life.

I want to be an environmentalist.

Spain and Germany taught me that or perhaps confirmed that. But more importantly they showed me how to be an environmentalist.

Spain reminded me the ethical requirements of caring for your foundations, of being in touch with nature and with the people around you. Spain reminded me about the unsurpassed beauty of the simple, whether that be a brook in a beech forest or a great conversation over a drink. Spain reminded me that it's the simple that environmentalism protects, that the health of society depends on the health of the planet. Spain also reminded me the dangers of how good ideas can go awry. Spain reminded me the basics.

Germany taught me the details.

Berlin was an intense introduction to laws and policy of the Europe's renewable energy powerhouse. The capital offered a wide-ranging overview. The rest of the country and the next three weeks demonstrated the intricacies.

Bavaria taught me how policy can enable a small village to produce 500% of their energy from renewable sources, helping both the planet and their pockets. Bavaria taught me how local governments actually go about implementing national policy. Bavaria even taught me how business is addressing a sustainable future at the largest solar trade show in Europe.

Afterwards, Freiburg was a revelation. The small city in Germany's southwest is no larger than Durham, but the two urban centers could not have been more different. Freiburg was vital. It was clean. It was easy. It was beautiful. It was welcoming. It was comfortable. Even for two weeks, it felt like home.

Some have called Freiburg the greenest city in the world, and with good reason. Located in the heart of Baden-Württemberg, right by the Black Forest, Freiburg and the surrounding regions were the heartlands for environmentalism in Germany in the 1970s.

The effects are plain to see.

Despite a small population, Freiburg's public transit system embarrasses larger cities, like my hometown Charlotte. Trams take riders across the compact inner city with ease, frequency and efficiency. For outlying communities, there's a bus for that. For truly long journeys, the train station, right in the center of downtown offers a connection to the region, state, country and Europe as a whole. What's most impressive, at least to an easily confused, bureaucratic American like myself, is how all of these systems can be, one, physically interconnected, but also, two, institutionally interconnected. All regional transport can be used with one ticket. In two weeks, I needed one ticket for trains, trams and buses. That ticket took me through Freiburg, into the heart of the Black Forest, out into the countryside and wine-country, even into France. It was all so simple and well-designed.

That goes for Freiburg as a whole. The city is built for humans. The downtown is fully pedestrian, the streets lined with shops and people, not hard granite facades meant to be ignored by passing cars. Every day, a local farmer's market sets up in the cathedral square. There are 16 such markets in other parts of the city throughout the week. It breeds life in the downtown; it breeds vitality and hustle. The downtown is a commercial hub, but the traffic isn't from cars. 40,000 cyclists commute to work daily in Freiburg. And the city is prepared for them, installing miles and miles of bike lanes, narrowing car streets, and even installing bicycle garages.

I had the privilege to bike through the city and explore, and nothing could have been simpler or more enjoyable. In ten minutes, I had left the downtown and was in a new development where sustainability was the way of life. Cars were largely unneeded in these suburbs, bike and tram the preferred means of travel. Housing was affordable, attractive and sustainable, emphasizing mixing of incomes and low environmental impact. Passive heating and solar panels were the norm, not the exception. Urban gardens sprung up left and right, on sidewalks, on terraces, on rooftops, even on walls themselves. And children played in the streets, because the community was built to live in and grow in. The community was built for people. Environmentalism protects the environment by definition, but always in the service of society. Freiburg epitomized that success.

Later in the trip, I got to leave Freiburg and explore the history of environmentalism, meeting with anti-nuclear activists from the 70s, meeting with energy cooperatives, meeting with the very demonstrators that created the green party, that created the environmental movement in Germany.

Germany's environmental movement is spreading. Germany's determination and leadership paves a sure path for the rest of the world. They did the hard work; they drove down prices; they tested the mechanisms; they hit the speedbumps and moved on. Now, it's up to students like me, who have seen the results, who have seen the success to come and preach of the promises.

That's why I am so thankful for this summer. That's why I am so thankful for this opportunity. That's why I say that applying for this program may have been my best Carolina decision. I've seen the future. It's possible. And it's inspired me to dedicate myself to that vision here at home, in my own state, in my own country.

This summer has given me the means to begin. And it's given me 21 other people who share my same vision. 21 other people who share the same dream of a sustainable world. 21 other, diverse, intellectual, driven people who are going to make a difference in our futures. I wish I could describe their impact on me with the proper justice, but words fail me. I would describe them with all the intimate detail that their personalities deserve, but I would fall short.

Perhaps it will suffice to say that only in Chi Psi have I experienced a similar bond grow so strong, so fast.

In truth, this report has done a poor job in expressing the impact of my summer, the breadth of experience contained in a magical six weeks too grand for a few pages.

But please know, this summer has been my best yet, this experience one of the defining periods of my life.

Thank you for making this possible.

Yours in the Bonds,
Wilson Sink