

Giang Nguyen
2011 Arthur Burns Fellowship
Final Report

I was a researcher with CNN International when I applied for the fellowship and was placed with ZDF, a public-service broadcaster, at their headquarters in Mainz. The big advantage for me is that I speak German fluently. I also grew up there, so I was able to adapt and immerse myself into the culture fairly quickly. The fellowship was nonetheless a very enriching professional experience that provided me with many great connections and lessons. To state the obvious, the more German you know, the greater your learning experience will be.

The first thing to know about the fellowship is that it is what you make of it. Don't expect anyone to serve you housing options on a platter or have a structured work program laid out for you. Be proactive and vocal early on. I was lucky in that I had a great contact person, a Burns alumna, at ZDF, who helped me find a cheap room. I didn't use the alumni list as much as I probably should have, but I believe they can be a great resource for finding anything from accommodation to story ideas.

ZDF is a big organization, which means two things. You can easily get lost among the hordes of interns (Hospitanten, Praktikanten, etc.) that they have. But it also means they have many resources, newsrooms for you to choose from and talented people who can show you the ropes.

When I came to ZDF, I knew I wanted to work on my own stories, produce and shoot them. I started in the heute newsroom, where my wonderful Burns contact introduced me to literally every person there, including the chief editors. As Frank Freiling recommended, I also sent out an e-mail to the newsroom mailing list, introducing myself. It was a great way to get on everyone's radar for potential assignments - and netted me a lunch with Frank.

ZDF and CNN can be quite far apart in mission and methods – one non-profit, public service, supported by fees and the other working for profit and ratings. It was quite eye-opening to learn about the subtle differences, such as the pace (faster in the US) and the discussions that go into each story (more intense in Germany).

After a week in the main newsroom, I wanted more hands-on work and asked to work a week at heute.de, the online department. It was another great experience that introduced me to the right people and set me up perfectly for my next request – to work at a Landesstudio, a bureau in nearby Wiesbaden. With each transfer, the newsroom became progressively smaller, which meant my assignments increased. At the Landesstudio, I was finally able to pitch, produce and shoot my own stories. The contacts I had made during the first two weeks at the main newsroom, and especially those at heute.de, provided me with direct access to the right planners and editors to work with for my stories.

Outside of work, I used my weekends to travel to different parts of Germany. We had a wonderful group of Burns fellows and met up in different cities on several occasions. I would highly recommend Mitfahrgelegenheit.de! It's a carpooling web site, where drivers advertise their route and you can buy a seat in their car. Not only is it a cheap way to get around, but I learned so much about Germans during those long drives. I mean, what better way to get to know someone's life than having to sit next to them for four hours or more? It's a wonderful way to get to know all kinds of people, 95 percent of whom are very nice and open to sharing their stories.

Although I am not currently working on Germany-related stories or looking to work in Germany, the fellowship was a wonderful experience I would not want to have missed. It has helped me grow as a journalist. It has given me invaluable insight into the German work landscape, the opportunities that are available and the connections, should I need them in the future. Most of all, it has given me friendships I hope to keep for a long time.

Links to some of my stories:

A German soldier suffering from PTSD fights for recognition, on the anniversary of the Afghanistan war (video):

<http://www.zdf.de/ZDFmediathek/beitrag/video/1454224/Ich-gehoerte-zu-den-Schwerverletzten>

Shortage of affordable living spaces sends students on a frantic hunt (video):

<http://www.zdf.de/ZDFmediathek/beitrag/video/1421414/Studenten-auf-der-Jagd-nach-einer-Bleibe>

Ultimate Frisbee German championship (video, 23 minutes in):

<http://www.zdf.de/ZDFmediathek/hauptnavigation/sendung-verpasst/#/beitrag/video/1444232/drehscheibe-am-20-September-2011>

German Language Day – or should we call it Denglish Day (story and vox pop video):

<http://www.heute.de/ZDFheute/inhalt/28/0,3672,8350044,00.html>

Symbols of world movements (picture gallery):

<http://www.zdf.de/ZDFmediathek/beitrag/bilderserie/1414158/Gesucht-ein-Logo-fuer-die-Menschenrechte?bc=sts;sta&bildIndex=2>

World's oldest porcupine (video, from third-party):

<http://www.zdf.de/ZDFmediathek/beitrag/video/1413136/Das-aelteste-Stachelschwein-der-Welt>

Extreme food prices in East Africa (wire story):

<http://www.heute.de/ZDFheute/inhalt/22/0,3672,8320726,00.html>

My first CD (vox pop video):

<http://www.zdf.de/ZDFmediathek/beitrag/video/1424348/Meine-erste-CD-war...>