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Independent Project focusing on Refugee Crisis (with support from Correctiv)

I landed in Berlin charged with adrenaline, ready to hit the ground reporting. I was the sole journalist on the 5-week independent project fellowship, in which I'd write about the experience of young refugees for [VICE.com](https://www.vice.com). "Just five weeks? Why so short?" The other fellows asked me when we met. But I felt confident—a freelance journalist with hefty wanderlust, I'd traveled reporting extensively, all in Latin America since I spoke Spanish.

My first story seemed clear from the moment I touched down in the airport. In the past week in Germany, four different acts of violence had occurred, two involving refugees, so I did an article for VICE News about how the nation was reacting. Using a poll that showed many Germans had grown more fearful and critical of Angela Merkel's refugee policy, I wrote an article with this focus, including interviews with people on the street. My U.S. editor put on a flashy headline, and German journalists and new friends criticized my article, claiming it was sensational. A few people I interviewed wrote me angry, saying they were shocked I printed their names.

I took to heart the criticism, and questioned my own methods—had I been too rash, leaping to conclusions that were untrue? The article plagued me—but it was the push I needed to prioritize thoroughness over speed during the fellowship. As I reported in Berlin, I learned how to balance American and German approaches to journalism (which have plenty differences, I found), and to reach out to German editors for perspective.

I focused my energy, then, on three long in-depth pieces and a couple of other shorter, lighter articles. Each one took longer than expected, partly because the non-profits and government officials expected me to give them more time than I typically would in the States, but I learned to adjust. For my first article, about unaccompanied minor refugees in Berlin, I had to jump through all sorts of hoops just to find teens who would talk to me—the opposite of the case in the States, where advocates have individuals ready to go for interviews. But after weeks of frustration, I found the wait was worth it: I met an Afghan teen and a Syrian teen who gave me intimate glimpses into their lives, and wove their stories together with holes I'd found in the system of caring for youths.

Not only did I build patience, but I learned the different expectations for interviews in Germany: In most cases, journalists only use subjects' names after clearly asking to (rather than assuming they can as we do in the States), and they often send back quotes or whole sections of their articles to the subjects for approval. Whereas I typically get emailed responses from U.S. government agencies, I got to interview officials in-depth on the phone—but on the condition I sent them sections of the article where I mentioned them. We compromised, and I sent them only their direct quotes for fact checking.

Since I was in the independent project fellowship, I had far less structure than the other fellows, which I'm used to as a freelancer. The publication Correctiv was assigned to offer me support, and the editors offered me desk space there and answered any reporting questions I had. The VICE.com Germany editor-in-chief also gave me great feedback, and I had a desk there I could use any time to work. It was helpful to have offices where I could work, but I also spent time in cafes writing since Berlin's coffee shop culture is delightful. Two of the best cafes for working are St. Oberholz and Cuccuma, but great ones are spread throughout the city.

In my quest to write about young refugees, I did significant pre-reporting by connecting with Berlin's massive community of refugees and advocates. I joined a weekly women's group of young women and children from the Middle East, Africa, and different parts of Europe; I visited refugee shelters and non-profits just to chat; I made close friends with a 20-year-old Syrian guy who constantly discussed story ideas with me. I also asked the German fellows for contacts while in D.C.—and one led me to the subject of my story on Syrian-German couples.

My immersion in the refugee community was the most personally gratifying part of my fellowship—as a journalist who typically covers immigration in the U.S., and mainly Latin American migration, I have a whole new understanding of the Middle Eastern and Northern African refugee influx into Europe. Berlin was the perfect place for my fellowship because it has become a truly international hub, with physical reminders of the city's grim, war-torn history present on every corner. All I had to do was stroll down the street, and in five minutes I'd pass sidewalk plaques for Holocaust victims, old Soviet housing, and Halal restaurants with women in headscarves pouring out.

I'd highly recommend the Arthur Burns fellowship to any journalist looking for a professional and personal push. The independent project option is ideal for someone with a clear idea of what he/she wants to work on and feels comfortable working independently, but I'd recommend the normal fellowship if you:

- Want to take language classes (there are none in the independent project)
- Crave a community of journalists around you each day
- Need a push from an in-person boss to get work done

Also, it's important to keep in mind that the independent fellowship is only five weeks, which can feel quite short. I actually ended up requesting to Frank Freiling to extend my fellowship to eight weeks, which he so graciously approved, and those additional three weeks made a big difference both to my reporting and to my comfort in Berlin. Berlin is an incredible city, but if you're placed there make sure to get out and visit other parts of the country—my trips to Saxony, just an hour-and-a-half train ride from Berlin, illuminated a whole other side of Germany, as did my time in Hamburg with the other fellows.

Overall, I can only rave about the Burns fellowship and my experience in Berlin. The fellowship offers both freedom to pursue your passions and connection to a global network of inspiring journalists.

Clips:

- 1) For Young Refugees, Marriage is a Form of Protection; <http://www.vice.com/read/for-young-refugees-marriage-is-a-form-of-protection>
- 2) The Purgatory of Being a Teen Refugee in Germany; <http://www.vice.com/read/the-aimlessness-of-being-a-teen-refugee-in-germany>
- 3) Seeking Asylum and Finding Love; <http://www.vice.com/read/seeking-asylum-and-finding-love>
- 4) How Syrian Refugees are Helping Each Other Adjust to Life in a Strange Land; <http://www.vice.com/read/a-refugee-to-refugee-guide-to-surviving-in-germany>
- 5) Germans face fear after four attacks in one week; <https://news.vice.com/article/germans-faces-the-summer-of-fear-and-anger-after-four-attacks-in-a-week>