

A special year – an interview with a former volunteer

How did you hear about the volunteer opportunity at Plowshare Farm?

I heard about Plowshare Farm through my brother Toby. He went there after he finished school in 2013. He grew so much because of the year he spent at Plowshare, personally and socially. He told me a lot about the many wonderful, but also hard and challenging, experiences he had. It impressed me and made me think about going abroad for a volunteer year as well.

After even more talks we had about his and his girlfriend Lea's time there (they met at Plowshare), they inspired me to apply for a year of service, to come and be a part of the Plowshare community and test my limits, my qualities and my ideas about this world and how it works.

How long were you there?

I went there the 24th August 2015 and came back exactly one year later. What's a year, really?

Coming back to Germany, I landed in the morning in Frankfurt. When I woke up the next morning in my bed, walked down the stairs in our house where I grew up, went for a run where I always went for a run in my home town Bamberg, saw all the old beautiful buildings, smelled the air which was so familiar, hugged my mum, smiled at my dad... only the welcome sign on my wall in my room, the two little tattoos on my body I got while I was gone, the way too many clothes I could choose from that morning, which were waiting in my closet, the absence of our beloved dog who passed away also that past year and myself and all I was and wasn't anymore while standing there. I was home but also so far away.

I had changed and even if everything seemed the same, one year is a long time and everything is something new, everything changes, every moment.

Why did you want to volunteer there?

I got very interested in Plowshare and the way the community works, how the people there live together, through my brother. I felt like maybe I could bring myself, my ideas and my will to learn and to challenge myself to this place and try out this kind of life-sharing.

I looked forward to meeting people in the community, working side by side with people with special needs, learning more about the potential of human beings in general and experiencing the give and take with other beings and with nature. I didn't know a lot about anthroposophy back then and still feel like I have to learn a lot about the ideas of the Camphill founders.

I also liked that Plowshare is a biodynamic farm in the middle of a little green paradise, in "the middle of the woods" in New Hampshire. I love animals but never really worked on a farm so that was an experience I wanted to have as well. But also the sustainable aspect, the idea of producing and consuming as much as the earth can give, is a basic life goal and value I want to share with others, inspiring each other to reduce the suffering on earth caused by mass-consumption.

Altogether Plowshare seemed like such a special place, where everyone with the wish to give and get, to grow and be supported when necessary, is welcomed. No matter where you come from, no matter what your challenges might be. You'll find respect and openness right there.

Did you get to visit any other Camphill communities?

I visited some of the other Camphill-inspired communities in NH. Lucas and Tobias Community are not far from Plowshare Farm and are always in contact with each other. I got to meet people from both, for example at the celebrations like Mardi Gras, Halloween, Easter, etc.

Also I was part of the Special Olympics team and got to meet other "Campers" from all over NH, for example in the White Mountains at the snow shoe tournament. Besides that, from June until August Plowshare opens its doors for summer campers from other Communities while they have summer break.

Also, I got to go to visit different Waldorf schools which are also inspired by Rudolf Steiner and so I could learn a little bit more about the different ways of teaching and learning in a more interactive and open way.

Which house did you live in?

I lived in Artaban House (it's the blue house at Plowshare). All the houses have different names, which are based on stories or inspiring personalities, which I really like.

The saga of Artaban is the story of the fourth wise man who wanted to go and see Christ when he was born. On his way he met a sick man and had to challenge himself with the question, if he should halt his travels to help the person in need or if he should go ahead and meet Jesus, meaning following his own wish and being sure to not lose any time. He chose to support the sick man and let go of his dream to see the Christ child. But by doing that he acted like Jesus would have reacted, out of charity.

This is just a very short abstract of the story, but I wanted to share this because I feel like this is one of the ways how I want to live and how the members of the Plowshare community are there for each other. I also want to mention here that I believe, that of course it's most important to be truly happy and care for yourself to be able to help others - but then giving as much as your own resources allow is a very beautiful way of living.

With how many people? What was your extended family like?

When I lived at Plowshare, we were 13 people living together. Some people had recognized special needs, some did not. Most of us were adults, but there were also two children (back then they were 5 and 3 years old). Three of us were doing a year of volunteer service (Emily from PA, John from Uganda, and me).

We spent our Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday together. Friday till Monday different people had different free days, so every day was covered in means of responsibilities and needed support in the household.

Even with a clear schedule and clear roles in the household, it can get stressful with 12 people around you all the time. This was maybe one of the biggest challenges for me, because it's definitely a different way of life when you live in a community. Since I had never done it before, I sure had to get used to it for a while.

Nevertheless, the warmth and love which surrounded me all the time and the gifts of the many different people with their own unique characters and qualities was (at least for me) worth all the little and bigger struggles I sometimes had. (Here a quick shout-out to Artaban House and my friends, to the house of love, I miss our time together!)

Where did you volunteer during the days at Plowshare?

I mainly spent my time volunteering on the farm and the land, helping out in the community kitchen, at home in the household, and had some other responsibilities. A normal day starts at 7am. Then there are two main activity periods throughout the day (morning and afternoon) with lunch and a rest hour in between. In the evenings we always had community activities like a sing-along or game night.

Here's a little overview:

On the farm and land, I worked together with others to care for the animals, harvest vegetables, cultivate the land, clean the barn, and split and stack firewood.

In the kitchen, I cooked with some very talented chefs a big lunch for the whole community. We used a lot of our own produce right from the Plowshare garden.

Then there was Special Olympics and other physical activity. Like mentioned, I was part of our sporty team at Plowshare. In the fall we went bowling every week, in the winter we trained in snow-shoeing and in the spring and summer I started a little fitness-dance class and we enjoyed the music and practiced our own choreographies.

A big part of this way of life of course was the sharing of both chores and social time in the household. Preparing meals, baking, cleaning, supporting personal hygiene, creative projects, just spending “quality time” with one another, and also caring for the kids after school, were all part of my daily life.

What were some of the things you learned during your service at Plowshare? Please describe.

I learned so many things, big and small: while volunteering on the farm I learned the basics about agriculture; I improved my cooking and also estimating how much of “this and that” I need when preparing a meal for a large number of people; I improved my English; I tried out eurythmy; I learned about the social system in the USA; I learned new songs; I learned how to brush somebody else’s teeth; I learned how to deal with any kind of problems an old used car could have (we bought a 2000 VW and ran with it many times to the repair shop).

And of course, I learned a lot about myself and developed my social skills.

I had to meet members of the Plowshare community and work and live with them for a while to see who has which abilities, who needs support doing special kinds of tasks, who finds it easier to work in a group, who can help better by doing one-one-activities, and so on. I had to figure out how much I can push myself and also how much I can ask of people with different kinds of special needs.

The summer before I went to the USA I had just finished school, so I wasn’t used to long days, especially in the context of community life. When I arrived at Plowshare I was very motivated to do my best and positive that I could handle all the tasks and responsibilities which I would get. I overestimated my own resources and had to learn when I needed to say “no, that’s too much for me; please help me; I feel overwhelmed, I need a break”- and I’m still working on that until now.

I had to learn how to find the best compromise for a larger group of people, how to make the best out of a situation sometimes. I had to let go of the idea of perfection in some moments, because there’s nothing like perfection but the whole of the best work we all can do and what we can give with all our hearts.

A very important personal goal for me is to meet a person or a situation without any prejudices. And I think that my time at Plowshare brought me a little further on achieving this goal. As humans it’s very hard to not categorize, but when I see someone/something for the first time I want to stay open-minded and give the other one the chance of big potential and qualities I can’t know anything about beforehand.

Members of the Plowshare community taught me what really matters when it comes to what defines humanity and confirmed for me that you should never judge the whole of a person by what meets the eye.

What makes us human is not a special IQ, it’s not one single ability like being able speak or walk like anyone else, it’s not a look... I believe that it’s true love between all beings, the energy that makes the world go round. It is staying true to yourself and meeting others and life itself with respect. It’s acting out of awareness and charity. It’s taking responsibility, helping each other when possible and both giving and receiving with love and kindness.

Maybe that sounds too simple but also maybe that’s at least part of what “human” means.

Favorite Memories:

I just remember this one moment when I felt deeply sad and lost, overwhelmed by many different things. It was a Sunday, my free day. I went upstairs to the living room and there was E. sitting on the couch. She’s a wonderful 45 year old woman with physical and mental challenges. She said “Hi Anna”. I sat down next to her and laid my head on her shoulder and told her “E., I’m so sad.” I couldn’t have explained her why, about all the worries in my head, but that wasn’t necessary. She felt that my heart was heavy, she knew exactly what to do. She put her good arm (the other one is stiff) around me and just said “Don’t worry – I’m here for you” and then she gave me a kiss on my head.

That was maybe one of the most touching moments I experienced with another human being. Normally I woke her up in the morning, helped her take a shower, helped her put on her clothes, etc. But the stability she gave me in that very moment, just being there for me, feeling my emotions and calmly putting her arm around me was the biggest gesture she could do for me.

Some of my other favorite memories:

All the hugs; the jokes, laughing and singing together; conversations with many inspiring people with different stories, characters and knowledge; the physical care and support, because I feel like it is very valuable; when I took one of my roomies to the gym and he had the chance to be a sport class instructor; the summer – meeting visitors from other communities and going on little trips; the child care quality times; the time with the animals; the teachings of the connection between body, spirit and nature.

Can you say something about the friends you made there?

I developed close friendships with the householders in my house and many other people in the community, including my co-volunteers.

We were 7 volunteers: four Germans, one American, one South Korean and one Ugandan (during summer camp two more wonderful young Germans came to support us). Over the year we shared our service activities, thoughts, worries and experiences, had a disagreement once in a while, supported each other, went on vacation together and just had a really good time. Of course you get to know the people you served with and spent most of your free time with the most, and also this influences how much you stay in touch. But I feel like we have many nice memories together and since we all have busy lives, we are happy when it's possible to keep up but it's okay if not and that it doesn't reduce the value of the time we had together.

I also made friends outside of Plowshare as well. People with a social connection to Plowshare, people I met at the Gym, on our trips around, etc. I am very thankful for meeting every single one of them, their open-minded and loving attitude and all their support!

What kinds of things did you do in your free time?

We went running or hiking (there are many beautiful, natural areas in NH to go for a hike); had some nice conversations in the evenings; we went to the cinema; made day-trips to little towns in NH, for example Newburyport; we also visited bigger cities like Boston or New York City a few times; with one friend I always went to the Gym together a few times a week; with another friend from the Gym I went to the theater or for lunch sometimes; and we as volunteers also went on vacation together.

Have you stayed in touch?

Yes. Like I said, it's different with every friend.

With some I write postcards or send little packages, with others we keep in touch by messaging and sending photos (all the time). Then I sometimes Skype for example with my old family at Artaban House.

But also, there have been reunions already. We as German volunteers met twice since we're back – the same applies for my brother and the other Germans who were on their year of service with him.

My best friends and I met a few times now.

But also from South Korea we already saw some of our friends again (my brother's co-volunteer and his brother and friend came to visit, sadly my Korean friend couldn't make it yet). Toby and Lea hosted someone from the Plowshare community when she made a trip to Germany this spring – I only could facetime with them.

In August I will see the daughter of a friend I met at the Gym again, which is very exciting!

For the future I have planned to definitely go and visit Plowshare again and also I wish to be able to travel and see my other friends around the world. And of course I invited everyone already to come and stay with me and my family!

I am very confident that we all will stay friends and be connected. No matter how many messages we'll text but because we shared this year abroad, because we have similar fundamental values and the appreciation for each other.

You said you also went on vacation together. Please describe your travel with them, your favorite memories and your impressions along the way.

Over the year we had main opportunities to travel. We tried to start planning as early as possible, since there are many things you have to think of: you have to decide where exactly to go; you have to find and book places to stay and also decide how long you want to stay where, etc.

The first travel we did was at Christmas break. The other German volunteers, Minjea from South Korea and me went on a road trip all the way from Greenfield, NH down to Miami, FL. We stopped in New York City for a few days, had one whole day in Washington, DC, and had a few destinations in Florida, like the Universal Studios in Orlando, Miami Beach, St. Augustin, the Everglades, etc.

This trip was very exhausting but great because we could get a first impression of the diversity of the different states in the USA, the countryside and the people themselves. We left Plowshare in cold December, laid in the sun on the Atlantic coast of Florida, and came back to a winter wonderland in NH.

For the second break in the spring we went to Canada, to Toronto and Montreal. We enjoyed the beautiful Lake Ontario, the colorful streets of those two cities, visited some museums, met nice people, went to Niagara Falls (which I personally found very frustrating because there were so many tourists and it didn't feel very natural, but like it was a place only made up to make money, to consume in one of the many hotels, casinos, food-places, etc around it). On our way back we drove through the White Mountains and spent a few more days in the diverse City of New York.

After the long summer break started at Plowshare and we had to say good-bye to all our beloved friends, we had a chance to make one more trip. We as volunteers all split up, too but most of us went to the West Coast. For this last trip especially we had to prepare everything beforehand: booking flights; finding places to stay, contacting friends who we could leave our luggage with; renting a car, etc.

I flew with Juliane from Boston to San Francisco. There we stayed with a friend of hers and her au-pair family. We rented a car there and then drove south and made one stop in Yosemite National Park and then in Sequoia and saw the mammoth-trees – both were very impressive and I think my favorite part of the trip. I only can recommend to go and see the beautiful nature the USA has to offer. And I really hope that the governments around the world will keep up / start to save the natural reserves everywhere... I feel like there's nothing humans could build with machines that is so breathtaking as these natural treasures.

We also drove to LA for a few days and from there made a daytrip to San Diego. We walked along Venice Beach, danced in the sand, got a little bit lost in the expanse of this big city, went swimming in the Pacific this time, and also saw things that made me stop and think.

Like when we were standing on the Walk of Fame and saw tourists running around like crazy taking selfies, consuming more and more of everything, souvenirs (made anywhere else but not the USA), and then saw homeless people sitting in the shade, because it was so incredibly hot, and asking for water – we were very frustrated. Later that day we saw a car – motor on – standing on the sidewalk but we couldn't see an owner. After a while two women came and went to the car with huge iced coffees in their hand. Not being able to accept this ignorance we went to them and asked very friendly if they could turn off their car the next time they want to go get coffee. They just said no. They seemed to have a lot of money. They didn't care. They left the car on so it would stay cool for them, they said.

I'm writing about this because this trip was very formative and not only in a light and freeing kind of way. It helped me see my responsibilities as a human being on this planet and made me clarify what I want to live for.

Even though I studied politics in school, was always interested in social systems and historical events and how they shaped politics world-wide, followed the news, read newspapers – so inequality wasn't really a secret to me – it maybe was this trip, actually all the trips together, the discussions with different people from many different places of the world and their impressions, this whole year, that made me see clearly what was going on. The dividing of countries, growing nationalism, blinding ignorance, massive natural catastrophes, greed, extreme population growth, pollution, hate and racism.

I saw that everything is connected and that by the way I consume and because of what I decide to do (or not do), I support or don't support world-wide injustice. And as long as consumerism is the global "way to go", there probably can not be true equality and I can't change that by myself.

But I can change myself and the way I consume. I can try to invite others to discuss with me how to make the world a better place and start with them by making little steps in this direction. I can go vote, I need to stand up for what I believe in and can only try to help people understand how much impact they can have and what we can accomplish together.

But to tell you the rest of our trip... We drove back to San Francisco and stayed one night with the Camphill of California on our way there.

Our last destination was Phoenix. There we stayed with friends of mine who I met when I was a child. It was so nice to see them again after all these years. With them we went to see Sedona, the Grand Canyon, and hiked on one of Phoenix's smaller mountains at 4:00 am (because otherwise it gets too hot).

Finally we just tried to relax a little bit in the heat of the desert before we flew back to Boston and then, after one year, back home.

It sometimes all seemed so unreal, like a dream.

I feel very blessed, that we had the chance to see so much, that we met so many generous souls, could learn many, many new things about ourselves and the world we live in and collect a variety of impulses which influenced at least my development for sure.

What are you up to now?

When I came back to Germany, I worked one year with kids with special needs back in Bamberg in cooperation with the "Lebenshilfe" and in a gymnastic club for kids. We did leisure activities together and through that I could learn another kind of social work, education and the needs and abilities of kids.

Also I used that year to find out what I wanted to study, because I wasn't quite sure back then. Thanks to my school, the support of my parents and friends, but especially the year in the USA I figured out what I want to do with my life. I decided to study Psychology, because I feel that this is a very good combination of my interests.

In school it always was biology which I loved the most. Understanding life, learning about the evolution and why "we are who we are" fascinated me. But my time at Plowshare showed me that on the one hand I personally appreciate the "giving and getting" very much, and also my peers and co-workers (no matter really if young or adult) were also satisfied with and thankful for my support.

So now I am studying in northern Germany in the second semester this very interesting subject. I get to learn not only why we are who we are but also why we do what we do, what influenced and forms us, what potential we carry inside and how we cope with difficulties in life and even more.

Besides that I'm working as a fitness trainer in a local sports club with adults but also children and young adult with hearing disabilities. I'm living with two young women in a little apartment close to my university and we get along great. I've made new friends, got many new impulses, and am excited and try to stay balanced for whatever comes next.

What are your plans for the future?

My plans for the future? Saving the world!

With that of course I mean that no matter what I'm gonna do, where I'll live, with whom I'll work, I always want to try to achieve the best I can, to support others as long as I have the capacities. I want to share the values and motivations I collected along my way. And maybe with the work as a therapist I'll be able to help people to get

back on their feet, to explore their full potential and worth, or to help find solutions with them to solve their personal problems.

Another little dream of mine would be the combination of therapy and sports based on my idea of a “healthy mind in a healthy body”. I’d love to keep working with people with special needs, also in a therapeutic setting.

I’d like to travel more and see different places, meet and talk with people, take care of all my beloved friends and my family, maybe have a family of my own in the next ten years.

And while doing all that I never want to lose sight of my own needs and limits and try to stabilize my inner-balance.

These are my plans. My goals. But I am realistic and so I want to add that I’m aware that you can make as many plans as you want, but then life happens. And my goals, I might never achieve (all of) them but I feel like the way trying to get there might be the best part anyway. ;-)

„All you need is love“ – the beatles.