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Welcome the Stranger

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Welcome the Stranger

Abstract

"...I am a German citizen teaching Spanish at a Christian Reformed college in Northwest Iowa. I know, you might have to read that sentence again to digest it. How did I go from living behind the Berlin Wall in my childhood to teaching a foreign language that is not my own at a Christian college in Iowa? By following God's call. Immigration was God's way of bringing me to the faith under the most unlikely of circumstances."

Posting about the author's immigration story from *In All Things* - an online hub committed to the claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for the entire world.

<http://inallthings.org/welcome-the-stranger/>

Keywords

In All Things, immigration, calling

Disciplines

Christianity

Comments

In All Things is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service](#) at Dordt College.

Welcome the Stranger

 [all in allthings.org/welcome-the-stranger/](https://allthings.org/welcome-the-stranger/)

Rikki Heldt

When an alien lives with you in your land, do not mistreat him. The alien living with you must be treated as one of your native-born. Love him as yourself, for you were alien in Egypt. I am the LORD your God. Lev. 19:33-34; cf. Deut. 10:19

My name is Rikki Heldt, and I am a German citizen teaching Spanish at a Christian Reformed college in Northwest Iowa. I know, you might have to read that sentence again to digest it. How did I go from living behind the Berlin Wall in my childhood to teaching a foreign language that is not my own at a Christian college in Iowa? By following God's call. Immigration was God's way of bringing me to the faith under the most unlikely of circumstances.

Born in 1981, I grew up in a Christian family in former East Germany towards the end of the Cold War era, where religion was frowned upon by the government. That means that even though people were not persecuted for belonging to the church, one could also not trust that anything said or done within the church or community would be kept confidential. In fact, the pastor serving while I was growing up was later found to have been spying for the government, using confidential and very personal information of the members of his congregation against them. The same was true for some of the elementary and secondary teachers instructing us during our formative years.

To make things even more difficult, when it came to building a strong Christian foundation in my life, faith was—and is to this day—treated as something that is not shared openly with family members or with other believers in public. Despite the fact that I was baptized as an infant (a gesture of defiance by my parents against the government) and confirmed the fall I turned 14, to this day I have no clear picture of what my parents truly believe. Due to those unusual circumstances, we, as a family, didn't attend regular church services except at Christmas or Easter. Showing faith openly was dangerous while the Berlin Wall was still up, especially since my family already endured close scrutiny. This was due to the fact that my dad had been labeled an enemy of the State and trying to escape from East Germany as a young man.

After the Cold War ended, the male members of my family negatively influenced my position towards the church through their strong feelings. My dad frequently expressed anger about the church as an institution because the church sheltered and protected pastors who had been government spies; my grandfather stated pure contempt because he viewed the church as an institution that extorted money to build beautiful buildings while the general population was starving. Those statements clouded every conversation I can remember having had with them about faith and religion.

At the same time, I also remember my dad vaguely referring to “the man upstairs” who had control over everything and that there was always hope that things would turn out for the better. My parents additionally taught us to be honest, caring, and willing to help others. They were and are the most hospitable people I know, always on the look-out for improving the situation of others. Our house always was a haven for people from different nationalities, socio-economic backgrounds, and belief systems. My parents did all these things for others not because it was the Christian thing to do, but the right thing to do.

God opened doors to new perspectives when I had the opportunity to spend the year as an exchange student with an American host family in Le Mars, Iowa. As the recipient of a full scholarship sponsored by

the United States Congress and the German Bundestag, Steve and Kathy Ver Mulm, as well as their four children, took me in as one of their own, and showed me by their daily Christian life what being a believer and follower of Christ really means. Their unconditional love, patience, devotion, and care of others as well as their strong belief in Christian education changed my life.

Just as each one of their children, I attended [Unity Christian High School](#) in Orange City, Iowa, where I was taught by Christian teachers for the first time in my life. I can't even begin to describe the difference those academic and personal



Photo courtesy of Rikki Heldt. (2013) Rikki with the VerMulg family

interactions made. Instead of being a number in a grade book, my teachers built relationships with me. They cared about me as a whole person made in the image of God, worthy of love, with more than just academic needs. They treated me as the complex being I am with physical, emotional, academic and spiritual needs. By striving to satisfy all of those needs, and doing so in love, faith, and in accordance with the scriptures, they changed my life. They not only modeled the structure of God's creation and how it is evident in every subject area, but also showed a deep sense of commitment to serving me, the stranger, with integrity in their daily lives. In the spring of that year, I surrendered my life to Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior, and vowed to become a teacher just like them.

I returned to Germany after that influential year, finished my high school degree, and felt a longing to come back to this community to grow in my new found understanding of this lived out faith. God continued to be faithful throughout the ups and downs that come with the immigration process that lead me to be the current legal resident alien (also known as a green card holder) that I am today.

Most people assume that because I am from a Western European country, speak English fluently, and am also married to a United States citizen, the rest was easy. It was not easy. Applications for various visas (first as a college student, then a work visa, and finally the green card process after I got married) were accompanied by confusing paperwork and documentation, long waiting periods with uncertain processing times, and grueling interviews that make you feel like a criminal. Add to that the financial burden, and I often found myself questioning why God was leading me down this path. I can't imagine how tremendously more difficult this journey would have been without the support, love, prayer, and encouragement from my host family, friends, and the Christian community. A community that took me, the alien and stranger, into their open arms.

I never in my wildest dreams thought I would be the German citizen teaching Spanish at a Christian Reformed college in Northwest Iowa. It wasn't my plan to be separated from family, friends, and a language and culture I understood and fit into. But it was God's plan. God used immigration, first temporary and then long-term, to lead me to find and ultimately fulfill my calling.

Dig Deeper

iAt is sharing immigration stories this week. Yesterday, John Lee shared his immigration perspective on [Immigration: A Tale of Two Grandfather](#). Come back to iAt tomorrow to read another story.

Do you have an immigration story you want to share with the readers of iAt? Email andreascenter@dordt.edu to share your story with us.