



TRIP TO THE MIDWEST

Attending a two-week creative writing and cultural exchange programme at the University of Iowa

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After years of monotonous academic stress, I was looking for something refreshing to do in the summer of 2024. And no, I don't mean re-watching my comfort movies and shows for the umpteenth time or sleeping for as long as I want to without guilt. I wanted to try something productive, out of my comfort zone, or simply new. Although I was convinced that my attempts were futile, a fantastic opportunity came my way.

From June 9 to June 22, I had the privilege to be a participant of a creative writing and cultural exchange programme called "Between the Lines (BTL): Peace and the Writing Experience" at the University of Iowa, sponsored by the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs of the US Department of State. This cultural exchange, through The International Writing Program, focused on various forms of creative writing.

Over two intensive weeks, 19 of us, from across the world took part in creative writing workshops and global literature seminars hosted by award-winning

writers Tariro Ndoro (Zimbabwe), Rochelle Potkar (India), Vladimir Poleganov (Bulgaria), and Senka Marić (Bosnia and Herzegovina). Other special seminars on digital storytelling, literary translation, playwriting, bookmaking, and dance were facilitated by esteemed faculty members and candidates pursuing master's at the University.


Some memorable events during my stay include the Jefri Palermo Art Show showcasing social and political commentary in miniature models at The Englert Theatre Gallery, movie night at the Iowa Memorial Union, attending a Juneteenth celebration in Downtown Iowa City, watching *Julius Caesar* live open-air at the Riverside Theatre and meeting the cast afterwards, a faculty reading followed by a book signing by the award-winning writers at the Prairie Lights Bookstore, and finally a graduation ceremony to celebrate our accomplishments with a published anthology collection of our writings.

Apart from the long flights, my two weeks stay in Iowa City was wonderful to say the least. I felt creatively inspired and appreciated in an inspiring environment due to the amazing people I had met, and the friends I made

along the way. The BTL staff created a warm and friendly atmosphere for all of us to feel like we were at home. The different workshops and seminars widened my horizons – creating a deeper sense of admiration for all creative forms of expression.

On the other hand, interacting with young writers from around the world expanded my understanding of their identities and fostered respect for their cultures. We also had an open mic night to showcase the literary talents and a karaoke night to bond with each other better (I was relieved to find out people my age love ABBA just as much as I do!)

Now that I am back home, I cannot help but miss the ordinary sights of rabbits hopping, squirrels running, and blossoming flowers around every block of structure with triangular roofs. Nonetheless, I am truly grateful for having the opportunity to attend this prestigious programme upon being nominated by my school counselor, which enabled me to become more confident, open-minded, compassionate, empathetic, and hopefully, a better writer.



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