

Roosevelt Scholarship Impact Report - Alex Ball

Background

I travelled to America courtesy of the Nottinghamshire Roosevelt Travelling Scholarship (NRTS) in the autumn of 2012 for eight weeks. My research topic was centred around the concept of the Company Town (a town or city with a dominant employer) but broadened into studying cities and local identity in general over time.

The trip consisted of visits to 17 locations in 14 states and entailed staying with local families or other hosts around half of the time. Throughout my trip I drove approximately 1900 miles, took 14 internal flights, made two long distance (36hrs+) train journeys and used as much local public transport (bus, tram, subway train and commuter rail) as possible.

At the time of the trip I was employed by Boots UK Limited (headquartered in Nottingham) and recently merged with Walgreens of Chicago and also served as a Councillor for Nottingham City Council. I was therefore able to combine studies of the local economy and employers as well as the local government. This included participation in the discussions surrounding the re-election of President Obama in November 2012.

Highlight Experiences

Whilst the full detail of my trip can barely be captured in this summary, I consider the following three experiences to be among the highlights of my trip.

1. Amtrak Minneapolis to Seattle. I took two Amtrak journeys whilst in America - from Minneapolis to Seattle and from Los Angeles to Houston. The undoubted highlight was the first trip. Most people looked at me somewhat askance when I mentioned that I was going to be taking the train, and when you think about it it is a somewhat perverse choice – the flight from Minneapolis to Seattle would take about three and a half hours and cost about £140 whilst the train takes a day and a half and costs around £400! But for the cultural and aesthetic experience I had to do it and don't regret a moment of it. The full details of this are on my blog but the real highlight of the Amtrak experience was the mealtimes. The PA system called it "family seating" but they meant communal – you made a reservation and got slotted into a table (of four) according to availability. As there were a fair few single travellers or couples this meant you never met the same people twice. I met a huge variety of people – from Dads travelling back from visiting their daughters at University, a couple enjoying their retirement, a guy doing a weekend commute from the orchard his parents owned in upstate Washington and pretty much everything else in between. In between these mealtimes and conversations I was able to enjoy the extraordinary scenery and took the time to reflect, think and write. Seeing the desolate wilderness of North Dakota and Montana roll past for a full day was a treat that I will treasure for a very long time.
2. Detroit. This really is a place that gets under your skin. I see from my speaking notes to the Nottingham Roosevelt Travelling Scholarship annual dinner upon my return that I described it as a "tragic, brilliant, beautiful place full of contradictions, challenges and hope". It's hard to summarise the impact that this place has had on me - the best summary is here (<http://nottsai.blogspot.co.uk/search/label/Detroit>) on my blogs at the time and just after but there is a rarely a week that goes by that I don't think about the challenges and opportunities represented by Detroit's past and present and how they can be applied to the future of Nottingham and other UK cities.
3. Bentonville. Being the owner of the Freedom of the City of Bentonville means that I can hardly avoid putting this city in here. But bragging aside, the lessons I learnt from Bentonville

and the way that the city's leaders engaged with their largest employer (Walmart) are highly applicable to public policy across the world. The way that reciprocal investment between the city and Walmart had been leveraged to create a hugely vibrant and thriving city and, in particular, downtown area are highly instructive. And the audacity of the eponymous Walton family investing \$1.4 billion in a modern art gallery in rural Arkansas is a model to cities and philanthropists everywhere.

Personal Impact

The overwhelming and long lasting impact of this trip was on me and my personal development. Whilst the ability to meet and discuss the new colleagues in Walgreens was useful and whilst I enjoyed seeing different models of retail and community engagement, these benefits will naturally decay and expire as my career and situation in life develops. What will never leave me is the emotional and social development that the trip engendered in me. These are hard to summarise but in headline form;

1. "Threshold Crossing". I identified, nurtured and developed a latent ability in myself to "cross thresholds". Sometimes this manifested itself literally with numerous moments of hesitation on the doorstep of total strangers who had agreed to let me stay on the basis of one or two emails but on a broader sense, the experiences mentioned above and detailed more fully in my report enabled me to understand in myself the skills and abilities I have to push on further than I ever thought possible - I am at my strongest and best when I take on a challenge or an experience that I did not think I would enjoy or be capable of.
2. Public Policy and Communication. The stark contrast between the post-industrial fortunes of Chicago and Detroit are a salutary lesson to all local and national politicians. Corruption in public office was endemic in both cities but for a variety of other reasons the relative fortunes of these two cities are a case study in public policy and public engagement.
3. Introversion Preferences. Whilst on the trip I read the book "Quiet" by Susan Cain which gives the clearest articulation I've yet found of the introversion/extraversion spectrum. The time and space to think this through and consider my preferences, along with the "threshold" experiences mentioned above have been genuinely transformational for me in my personal behaviours and practices.

Whilst in many instances intangible, the above impacts have undoubtedly enabled me to progress my career further and faster than I might have otherwise expected and as I (at the time of writing) transition into the next stage of my career, I know that I will be able to draw upon these lessons and experiences to ensure that I achieve the goals that I set myself.

Alex Ball
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