**Thomas J Moran Travel Scholarship Report**

It was August 12, 2019, when I stepped on a plane to move to the United States of America. Armed with just my suitcase, I took off on the most unforgettable journey of my life to Chicago. I had always dreamed of one day moving to America, and there I was, finally, standing wide-eyed in Dublin Airport with a bag-load of dreams, nerves and expectations. Despite my woes, I was determined as ever to get stuck into my Study USA year abroad and propel myself further in life by meeting new people, making new connections, seeing new places and learning new things. I did all of this and more, and though the year ended abruptly due to COVID-19, there has been a remarkable difference in my levels of confidence, resilience and knowledge as a result.

When I arrived at Chicago O’Hare International Airport, it was hot and humid, and very rainy outside. I instantly felt the fast-paced American culture all around me, with lots of people shouting and rushing around. I was no longer in Dublin. Luckily, I saw this bushy blonde-haired woman with a sign that read ‘North Central College’ walking around, so I approached her and said, “I think you’re looking for me.” This woman was Kimberley Larsson, Executive Director of the Center for Global Education. One-by-one, other students joined. French. German. Spanish. Bosnian. Australian. Russian. Japanese. Right away I was in the thick of cultural diversity, and I loved it. We then crammed into a shuttle bus and headed to Naperville, about 40 minutes from O’Hare. I was in awe of the massive highways, billboards and buildings that surrounded us. I really was in America! In terms of culture shock, nothing ‘shocked’ me per se. I loved the challenge of adapting to a new environment as I had never taken up such a drastic transition in all my life until then.

The international students all became very close in the first semester. I made some of my best friends within the group of international students, but also the Americans. What’s nice about getting close to other internationals is that they’re far away from home and adapting to a new environment, just like you. It was great to experience people from so many different backgrounds. There were times we would get frustrated because we were misunderstood for something that would be so normal in our home countries. I was once explaining Brexit to a fellow classmate when he interrupted me and asked the following: “wait, what’s Brexit? Is that a country?” You just have to laugh in those moments. America is a highly diverse country, but it’s also competitive (which makes it so exciting). People are always going somewhere or doing something. They always have a goal in mind, a meeting to be at, or money to earn. I developed better practices in the states because of this, such as keeping a good routine, waking up early, studying more consistently and exploring more. I think the cultural diversity has been good to me.

After orientation I was right into classes. It felt surreal being in an American classroom given that my childhood was consumed by American television shows centred on the American high school and college experience. For the fall semester I took classes in marketing, international business, environmental economics and an elective called ‘people and nature’. In the spring, my classes were social entrepreneurship, computer programming, business law and another environmental studies elective. North Central College has an amazing focus on sustainability. I am interested in the dynamic between business and the environment, and this scholarship allowed me to study just that. Now I feel better prepared to complete my dissertation in final year, which I hope to do on environmental ethics. The environmental field is growing and the jobs market for candidates with this kind of knowledge and experience is only going to get bigger in the future. Moreover, my social entrepreneurship class involved me coming up with a social venture plan to address a social issue I am passionate about. I have finalised a plan for a social enterprise that addresses the link between our environment and mental health, which I hope to implement at Queen’s. I was gifted with a renewed entrepreneurial spirit during my time studying in the US, which in itself comes with an eagerness to take every opportunity that presents itself to you.

I very much welcomed the differences between the US and UK education systems and appreciate both in their own way. I recognise what makes the system I am used to at Queen’s so great, but preferred certain elements of the system at North Central College. I especially liked the flexibility of choosing classes and electives and found it interesting how American students do not apply to colleges per course they want to do, as they can declare their ‘major’ well into their studies. It seems American students have a much heavier focus on extracurriculars in conjunction with their academics. With that being said, I myself joined Enactus which was a nice contrast to my social life in Belfast which mainly consisted of either working or going out. In a way, I think studying in the US has helped me develop a more balanced mindset when it comes to student life - it’s not all about partying hard and spending obscene amounts of money every week.

I will be ever grateful for this study exchange. I look back on my time at North Central College already so fondly. My favourite moment was attending the Global Climate Strike in downtown Chicago with some of my best friends in September 2019. That moment exuded everything I learned throughout the year - friendship, reflection, Chicago, passion, activism, confidence, strength and resilience. I have an almighty appetite to return to the states one day, but for now I am quite content at home. I have realised that these places I had been so used to are now new to me again as I step back in old environments with a new persona and a new sense of direction in life. That’s all thanks to this opportunity I was graced with and the additional opportunities it created along the way. My year abroad saved me in many ways, and for that I hold so much gratitude to everyone who makes Study USA happen, as well as those who selected me to be awarded the Thomas J Moran Travel Scholarship which went a long way in allowing me to take up every opportunity I could in the US when it came to networking and travel. I can confidently say that I left Chicago having had a deep and profound life-changing experience that I will never forget.