

John Doe

Statement of Purpose for Rotary Fellowship Application

My good friend Pavel often reminds me of a Czech proverb, which he translates as: “A man is only as smart as the number of languages he knows.” I know that speaking other languages opens me up to different cultures, new conversations, heightened awareness, and greater understanding. With every language I learn, with every one I hear but do not understand, I grow more adamant in that belief. But even when I tell Pavel I think he’s right, he never listens. “You’ve got to learn to speak Czech,” he always says—frustrated that I don’t fully understand the conversation. As an ethnographer studying Brazil, language is my key to understanding others and irrevocably linked with a greater awareness of the culture from which the language derives. The Cultural Ambassadorial Scholarship will allow me to obtain fluency in Portuguese, and at the same time begin to study the urban São Paulo environment for my doctoral thesis.

I have always been interested in languages because I grew up in a bilingual family, learning Arabic at the same time I learned English. While the Czech proverb says that the more you study the smarter you’ll get, I have come to find that learning language only emphasizes how much I have yet to understand—whether it is semantics, manners, literature or social chemistry. Until I learned Spanish in Buenos Aires, for instance, I didn’t know how fascinated I would become with urban ethnography, which eventually became the focus of my graduate degree. The city and the language, its heritage of Spanish and Italian immigration, were all intertwined.

My academic interest for language and cities began during my second year at university when I realized that my school did not offer the study abroad opportunities in South America. Instead, I researched possibilities on my own and took a leave of absence to pursue this goal. Studying in Argentina gained me fluency in Spanish, but more importantly it won me friendships with people in walks-of-life completely different than my own, people who taught me how little I understand the world, and yet how much I can contribute. In a city of 20 million, there are quite a few characters to meet! The lifestyle in Buenos Aires also goaded me to travel more and eventually see Brazil and the big urban center of São Paulo. In the three weeks that I was there I became infatuated with the grandiosity of its urban environment, its culture (or cultures, more accurately) and the language. The structure of the city’s ghettoized neighborhoods would eventually become the topic of my thesis.

When I returned to college the following autumn, I enrolled directly in an intermediate Portuguese class, even though I had long since finished my school’s language requirement. I know from that experience that, once in Brazil, I will be able to learn the language with relative ease if I am given the time and learning environment that the Rotary scholarship provides. Brazilian Portuguese is a language that is best learned by immersion. Having said all this, I think it is clear why I am interested in the Cultural Ambassadorial Scholarship. As an ethnographer, a reader, and above all, a listener, gaining proficiency in Portuguese is my next logical step. To accelerate my learning, I also plan on taking an advanced course in Portuguese before the scholarship begins.

This Rotary scholarship will further me in both my personal goals and my social responsibilities. As an urban ethnographer, it is essential to understand people and, as I have attempted to explain here, I believe that language is an invaluable tool in this process. Conversing directly with others is the best way—sometimes the only way—to conduct the necessary interviews and research in the field. As a global superpower, America today is in a unique position because our culture influences and disseminates through the rest of the world. The disadvantage, which is often overlooked, is that as a nation America is not as ready to accept or even be exposed to foreign ideas. We are losing out on the exchange of ideas. In my professional career, I want to explore this reality. As an ethnographer and a Rotary fellow, I want to contribute to what I see as a discussion between different cultures that can only benefit all sides.

The Cultural Ambassadorial Scholarship offers me the opportunity both to visit and learn from a Brazil, as well as opening the door to a new world of people, experiences and literature. My research into the neighborhoods of São Paulo require me to be there on the ground and study firsthand, conversing with the people in their own language. I believe that I will benefit the Rotary Foundation's goals by becoming an active leader, sharing my experiences both in America and abroad. I have already been in contact with the local Rotary chapter in São Paulo. Milton da Silva has been a very gracious correspondent and tells me there are many local communities he can introduce me to once I arrive. His encouragement also shows me that my language skills in Portuguese already have a good foundation.

Once I have some proficiency in Portuguese, I will certainly move on to other languages. One day, after all, I promised Pavel I would learn Czech.

This essay was professional edited. Doesn't your essay deserve the same treatment?

What's good about this essay?

- It makes clear its purpose: to study Portuguese in São Paulo.
- It offers evidence of past experience and success in the field.
- It says how the Rotary Foundation will benefit too.
- It tells a good story--not essential, but it helps!