



ROANOKE VALLEY SISTER CITIES

A Conversation with Liesl Grieder (RVSCI intern, 2019 & 2021)

Interviewer: Charissa Roberson (2021-22 RVSCI intern)

Note: This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

CR: When and where did you do your internship with Roanoke Valley Sister Cities?

LG: I actually did two separate internships with RVSCI. The first one was a travel internship based in Saint-Lô during the summer of 2019. I was there because the 75th anniversary of D-Day was happening, so they needed a bunch of help. The second one I did was in the spring of 2021, and that was based in Roanoke. It was a virtual internship.

CR: Why did you decide to intern with RVSCI?

LG: For my first internship, I heard about it from Dr. Groff [previous professor of French at Roanoke College]. I was trying to study abroad at the time, and so I was really excited by the idea of, not studying abroad necessarily, but doing an internship abroad. I had been aware of RVSCI and what they do in the valley, and I was looking to get more experience in different kinds of non-profits. I was really interested, and still am, in non-profits. In college, my focus was language, and history...If I could rewind the clock, I think I would have wanted to even do some focus in International Relations. So the RVSCI internship dove-tailed beautifully with my interests and passions and things I care about. With so many crazy things happening in the news, I often take a step back and think, "What can I actually do to make the world a better place?" This idea of citizen diplomacy, to me, is a very practical way that I can actually make a difference on an international scale.



The second internship was very closely intertwined with my distinction project for the honors program. It was less language-based and more research-based. My project was a comparison of three of the sister cities: Roanoke, Opole, and Saint-Lô. I was trying to see how they were doing and do interviews with people to ask about their experiences. That was really the bulk of my second internship. It was a lot less of actually being a citizen diplomat, and more of asking other people what it was like for them and why it worked or didn't.

CR: Could you talk a bit about the logistics of the Saint-Lô internship – how it worked and what you did there?

LG: I like to say there were three parts of my internship. It was really only about a month long. During that month, I had a one-week period where I was getting acclimated and helping Jeanine Vérove [president of Saint-Lô 44 Roanoke] set up and prepare things for the 20th anniversary of the twinning between Saint-Lô and Roanoke. It lined up well with the D-Day anniversary and commemorations, so there were a lot of events going on. We met with the mayor regularly and were putting things together. Half the time I was trying to just understand the French! Jeanine was shuttling me around and being patient with me and helping me with my French. Then I had a two-week period where I was teaching English at the local secondary school. Each class had me about twice a week. They would come into my classroom, and the teacher would drop off the whole class, and then I would do English language games with them.

CR: Wow, fun.

LG: It was a lot of fun – it was crazy for me, because I was maybe 19 or 20 at the time, and I was suddenly in front of this classroom with like 30 kids who didn't understand what I was saying! I think that's probably the memories that I look back on the most fondly. It gave me a lot of confidence. You sometimes don't know what you can do until you're thrown into a situation and forced to do it. So that was a really cool experience for me. I still look at the idea of teaching as a possibility, because of those fond memories.



Then the third part of the internship was the last week, where I was helping at various museums in Saint-Lô. One of them was le Musée Bocage Normand, which focuses on farming. We went to the local farmer's market and were teaching people how to make butter – lots of local engagement type things. Then I was also helping at the art/history museum there, le Musée des Beaux Arts. I was helping them do a lot of odd jobs that I could do without having to understand everything. For me, at the time, I was very interested in museums and thought that I would want to go into grad school for museums – I still think that's a possibility, just not right now. But what I'm getting at is that this internship experience was tailored to my desires and

my interests, which I think was just marvelous. It wasn't like I came over there and was helping Jeanine the whole time. Instead, she tried to organize the internship so that I was having experiences that were worthwhile to my specific career path, yet also not putting me in a situation that I couldn't handle. And of course, all throughout that experience, I was also spending time with my host families and with Jeanine and with the other Americans who were there at the time for the D-Day commemorations. It was a really fun time.

CR: It sounds like it! You talked a bit about highlights, such as working in the classroom – were there other moments that stand out to you as you look back?



LG: Another really special moment was towards the end of my internship, when they had the big party for the 20th anniversary. It was a nice culmination to my experience there, because I saw all the people I'd met, all in one place. There were speeches in French, there were speeches in English, there was a delicious meal with great French food, and then after that we went to a local dance that was happening at the church. There were a bunch of 1940s American-themed parties and events going on. In Normandy they really get into that, especially for the 75th anniversary [of D-Day]. So after the party, a bunch of us went over to the dance where they were playing 1940s swing-style music. (*Laughs*) That was interesting because I was in France dancing to American swing music.

CR: That's so cool. As for what you took away from the internship – you mentioned gaining a lot of self-confidence. Were there any other skills that you developed while you were there?

LG: I could even expand on the self-confidence aspect. Whether you're studying abroad, or just living abroad, even for as short a period as a month – anytime you have that immersive experience into the language, it teaches you to be okay with being uncomfortable. It seems like a weird skill, but I think it's really applicable. I'm in a job now, for example, where I am very confused as to what's going on, I don't know anyone, and I'm working virtually. There are lots

of experiences in life where you're uncomfortable and you need to sort of be "comfortable" with being uncomfortable. I think that's something I learned and got better at doing.



Another skill of course was French. My French was probably the best it had ever been after that experience, because it was even more of an immersive experience than it was when I studied abroad, where I was in an American school in Brussels. French language was a big one. What else? Probably learning how to teach. I learned how to develop a curriculum, how to be confident in front of a classroom, how to wrangle kids who don't understand what you're saying... *(Laughs)* Also cross-cultural communication skills. The whole time [in Saint-Lô] I was noticing little differences between our culture and theirs, and it made me better at being able to communicate with French people and understand where they're coming from. There's only so much you can understand about another culture without being

there and seeing how they work and needing to adjust your own habits to their habits, because you're the odd one out.

CR: Did you make any lasting connections from your internship in Saint-Lô or here in Roanoke?

LG: I had two different host families when I was in France, and both of them I had amazing, amazing connections with. They're still friends. I don't necessarily keep up with them all of the time, but they're the kind of friend where I could email them or send them a letter and they'd be so happy to hear from me. I have this ongoing invitation to come visit them anytime, and vice versa, for them coming here. I did have a really cool experience when I was studying abroad in Brussels. My Belgian host family – they're Belgian, but they live in France – was visiting Belgium, and so we met up together and had dinner. It was cool to have actually acted on those relationships and done something to maintain them. It was probably a year after I had been living with them. Another ongoing relationship has been the teacher that I worked with in the secondary school in France. She and I had a really cool connection, because we found out that she had done a Fulbright in Wisconsin, which is where



I'm from. She was really helpful when I applied for my Fulbright. She was an advocate for me and wrote recommendation letters for me. A lot of them have been sort of professional relationships that I've been able to maintain.

For my Roanoke internship, I wouldn't say that I was super close to the people I worked with, just because I hadn't lived with them. That's a very different experience. But I learned a lot professionally from Madame Fassié, and I feel that I could check in with her and she'd like to hear how I'm doing. I also was interviewing a lot of the members of RVSCI, and a lot of them I think it'd be good to touch base with as well. My relationships with Roanoke people just aren't quite as tight-knit, and I think that's a matter of the different nature of the experience – especially since it was virtual. Trying to connect with someone virtually is not the same. It never will be.

CR: You mentioned that the internship was tailored to your interests and planned career path. Would you say that doing the internship helped you toward your career goals?



LG: Definitely. Especially the second internship, based in Roanoke. I saw more closely the innerworkings of how a small-city non-profit is run. My previous experiences, like previous internships I'd done in D.C. or in other small museums in Roanoke, they were different kinds of non-profits where it was a more formal board, and they would have more regular meetings. I think it was beneficial for me to see how RVSCI runs, in that they can have this really professional amazing presence online and be doing cool things, and yet it isn't, in my opinion, overly formal. Like their board meetings are just a bunch of people getting together and talking and giving updates on things. As far as the citizen diplomacy and the language, I'm not using that in my career at this time, but I still feel that the professional experiences and even simply bulking up my resume – that all helped me.

CR: What do you think makes the Roanoke Valley Sister Cities organization special?

LG: What makes RVSCI really special in my mind is how Roanoke is a relatively small city, yet RVSCI has, in my opinion, a pretty big impact. They have seven sister cities. That's a lot for one, rather small, southeastern city. Also, the fact that it's so approachable and easy to get involved. When I was thinking through my honors distinction project, I had this idea to work with RVSCI, because I already had this previous relationship with them. I approached Madame Fassié about it, and she was super open to me being an intern so that I could do all this research and help them by extension. I think that's something special. RVSCI is open to people coming with an idea, coming with a project, and making it happen.

CR: That's something I've noticed too. They're like, "Oh, you want to do that?"

LG: "Do it!"

CR: "Let's help you out!" Which is really nice and encouraging. I just have one final question, and I think I probably know the answer. Would you recommend this internship, either in Saint-Lô or Roanoke or any of the other cities, to another Roanoke College student?

LG: Absolutely. As someone who has done an abroad internship and one in Roanoke, I totally recommend either of them. Doing an internship abroad with RVSCI is life-changing, and doing something in Roanoke can be, in my opinion, career-changing. Though it probably goes both ways. I learned a lot, I made life-long connections, I developed my interest in citizen diplomacy and sister cities. Now I'm trying to get involved with sister cities here in Wisconsin. It set me up with life skills and made possible this whole-person development that Roanoke College really strives for. I really cherish those memories, and I'm grateful for all the experiences I've had.

