



# Moises Mendoza \*

Hearst Fellowship Reporter

Home Media: Houston Chronicle, Houston, TX

Guest Media: Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, Frankfurt

As a reporter at the *Houston Chronicle*, Moises Mendoza covers a wide spectrum of topics ranging from crime to immigration. A 2007 graduate of Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service, Moises has written for the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Associated Press* and the *St. Petersburg Times*, among other news organizations.

Moises most recently was in the Hearst Fellowship, a two year program for young journalists, and worked in Houston, San Antonio and Seattle.

In addition to being a reporter, Moises is a licensed emergency medical technician and teaches English to recent immigrants.

## Report by Moises Mendoza

I entered the Burns Fellowship with excitement but also some trepidation.

During our orientation week, I learned that at 25, I was the youngest of the fellows. I also felt as if I didn't have enough of a plan for my next two months.

Plus, my fellowship was at the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, one of Germany's most vaunted news organizations. I had some reasonable story ideas, but how to localize them for the Houston Chronicle, where I am normally on staff? And how would I manage to fit in at FAZ?

One of the other fellows chatted with me on a bus trip through Washington, D.C.

"Don't worry at all," he said. "You'll find stories there. Everything will be OK"

He was right. And though I did find neat stories during two months abroad, the fellowship was much more than a successful reporting excursion. Overseas, I made new friends and rediscovered how special Germany is. I gained confidence in my abilities and rekindled my love for journalism.

It was a wonderful time, one that I will always treasure and remember.

It's funny how memory works. Often odd snippets are what stay in our minds while the fine detail gets lost with the passage of time.

So instead of describing what the fellowship gave to me, I'll offer some vignettes that illustrate that.

These short experiences changed, even if just a little, the way I looked at the world around me.

### **Lesson 1: Making sense of misunderstandings helps us understand each other.**

We all strive to avoid misunderstandings. But sometimes, especially in cross-cultural situations, that's impossible to do.

One of my favorite misunderstandings during my fellowship involved a word very important to reporters: "notebook."

My very first story idea was about Germans who love Texan culture. So, of course, I needed to take notes at a Wild West club's line dance. I asked an editor at the FAZ for a notebook.

"Warum?" he asked.

I explained, in German, that I needed to take notes.

He stammered a few times before asking why I couldn't just use a notebook tomorrow.

"Can't I borrow yours?" I asked. The editor responded that he only had a notebook at home.

Finally he went to ask his boss for permission to loan me a notebook. When they came back to question me some more, I realized where we had gone wrong.

Germans, usually use the word “notebook” to mean laptop computer. I should have said I wanted a “Notizblatt,” an actual notepad.

For a half-hour we had been using the same words to mean completely different things. Eventually I got my Notizblatt and went off and reported my story.

But the experience made me wonder. How often, in intercultural contexts, do we misunderstand what others mean and never figure out that “our wires were crossed?” I wonder how many seemingly intractable problems arise from these misunderstandings.

## **Lesson 2: Be a human**

One morning I was riding the S-Bahn (commuter train) when I noticed an argument between a Deutsche Bahn worker and a student from Syria.

He had bought the wrong train ticket and had been caught during a ticket sweep. They were demanding he pay a 40 Euro fine.

I could tell that the student had made an honest mistake and felt sorry for him. But I also knew train personnel don’t often relent in Germany – rules are rules. So I watched, wondering if I should step in.

The man only had a few Euros in his pocket and couldn’t pay the fine right then.

“We’re taking you to the police now,” the conductor said as he pushed him off the train at the next stop.

Just then a random German walked up to the student and slipped 50 Euros into his hand.

As the train pulled away, I saw the student hand the conductor the money and walk off. For the next few hours I felt guilty. I wondered if I should have helped the foreigner myself. After all, it’s easy enough to make mistakes on Deutsche Bahn. I too have bought the wrong ticket, although I’ve never been caught by inspectors.

But then I realized I had seen something extraordinary.

I saw someone make quite a sacrifice – 50 Euros is the equivalent of nearly 100 dollars – to help a hurting human out.

During my Burns Fellowship I found regular Germans remarkably sensitive to other people’s pain. The S-Bahn incident illustrated that.

The selfless action of that man made me resolve to be more human, to help others even if there’s a cost to myself.

**Lesson 3: In a world of connections, hard work still pays off**

I found an awesome story that no English-speaking journalist had yet reported on. A group of Internet tricksters convinced Germany's wire service to report a suicide attack in California by a German rap group. Of course, it was a hoax. But it sent the country to a brief frenzy and I thought it was a sufficiently bizarre story to sell to media in the United States.

But despite writing and reporting a story in English, I couldn't get anyone to buy it. For 48 hours I worked the phones, asking for assistance from every contact I could think of.

I sent emails, begged Burns alumni for help and even called the ICFJ offices to ask for advice.

Just when I was ready to give up, Wired.com decided they would buy the story. Even with a network as robust as the Burns Fellowship's alumni, there's no easy way to get an in with editors.

So I've always liked to think that being a successful reporter is about hard work and finding an angle nobody else has.

The process of selling this story, though difficult, convinced me that hard work, in the end, usually makes all the difference. It renewed my belief that journalism is the closest profession to a meritocracy. That's one reason I've always loved reporting.

**Going home a better journalist and a person**

My Burns Fellowship was at times overwhelming but also freeing. It wasn't easy coming into a foreign environment with the language skills of a small child. But it was wonderful to discover that I could adjust, perform and learn. And I loved that many of my colleagues seemed to want to learn as much from me as I wanted to learn from them. My favorite moment as a fellow took place in a conference room at the FAZ's towering headquarters in Frankfurt. There, I made a brief presentation to online staffers about how the Houston Chronicle's reporters and Web site staff work together. Then I heard from my German colleagues about how the FAZ does things. That day exemplified the whole purpose of the Arthur Burns Fellowship. We learned from each other.