



OUR EXPERIENCES AT THE WORLD'S LARGEST CONFERENCE FOR WOMEN IN TECHNOLOGY

# REPORT ON GRACE HOPPER CELEBRATION 2017



TRAVEL GRANT RECIPIENTS

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## INTRODUCTION

# THE GRACE HOPPER CELEBRATION TRAVEL GRANT

Grace Hopper Celebration (GHC) is the world's largest technology conference especially aimed at women of all ages and career levels. Since its founding in 1994 the conference has come a long way. From a mere 500 attendees at its first installment it has grown to host over 18.000 inspiring women from all over the world this year – and we were lucky enough to be among them.

» **GO WHERE YOU ARE CELEBRATED,  
NOT JUST TOLERATED.**

**GHC'17**

Back in June we all applied for the GHC travel grant offered by Informatik-Forum Frauen (IFF), the women in computer science group at the Informatics department at Technical University of Munich (TUM). The grant was intended to give students at the department the possibility to attend the conference in the US. It covered all our expenses from visa costs, transportation to and hotels in Orlando - where the 2017 conference was held - to conference registration fees and food & drink during our stay.

ANNE R. NYOKABI

## GRANT APPLICATION & VISA PROCESS

I had always hoped that one day I would have the chance to attend GHC. So when the opportunity presented itself, I was delighted and determined to present my grant application in the best way possible.

Therefore I made sure to fully express my interest and motivation for attending the conference in my motivational letter. I also stated how I would extend my experiences from GHC to IFF. The motivational statement as well as other supporting documents such as resume and grade transcripts had to be submitted through an online form. Fortunately after only a few weeks I was awarded the travel grant, as were Carmel, Fjoralba and Nathalie.

When I learnt the good news, I immediately started preparing my documents for the visa application process. However, in order to apply for the visa, I needed to provide the GHC registration confirmation letter as a supporting document. Hence, I had to put preparations on hold until I was officially registered for the event.

The day of the official registration was a nerve-wracking one! Due to the extremely high popularity of the conference the registration server kept shutting down and in less than five minutes all of the student tickets seemed to be sold out (at least this was what the webpage claimed...). By that time only one of us was able to secure a ticket. The rest was in panic mode, constantly refreshing the browser. Luckily Ana Petrovska, IFF associate and former grant recipient, was there to support us during the registration process. I am very thankful to Ana for her help and constant encouragement. Fortunately after a few hours of using several laptops and phones and probably hitting the refresh button a few hundred times, we all succeeded in obtaining our tickets. Now I knew I was *in* and there was nothing stopping me from attending the keynote speaker event with Melinda Gates in October!

Little did I know another challenge was waiting for me. The American embassy decided that I should not step into the US. My visa was denied on the day I applied for it. I could not believe it! The thought of not being able to attend GHC after all was heartbreaking. Nonetheless, I decided not to give up and reapply. I called and wrote everyone who had ever applied for a visa, gathered all the documents recommended to me and resent my application.

The second time I presented my papers I was determined that I would be going home with a visa approval. And finally after two weeks of hustle and a lot of explanations to the officer in charge I was granted the US visa. I was overjoyed!

### MY ADVICE FOR FUTURE APPLICANTS REGARDING THE APPLICATION & VISA PROCESS

Make sure to clearly illustrate your motivation and passion for attending GHC. Regarding the visa application: do your research. All visa cases are handled differently depending on your country of origin and your status in your country of residence. Take all relevant documents to the embassy and when asked a question, answer clearly, correctly and with confidence. The reason for my initial visa denial was the suspicion that I would not return to Germany, if granted the US visa. How they came to this conclusion I do not know, their explanation was vague and unhelpful.

NATHALIE PETT

## TRAVEL ARRANGEMENTS & IMPRESSIONS ON ORLANDO

After successfully registering for the conference mid-July, we immediately started making plans for the journey to Orlando. The time to obtain all necessary official documents to enter the US, as Anne previously stated, should not be underestimated. It

### MY PERSONAL CONFERENCE HIGHLIGHTS

ANNE R. NYOKABI



This was my first time attending Grace Hopper Celebration of Women in Computing. It was phenomenal!

I arrived one day before the conference, so I had enough time to go through the conference schedule and to collect my badge from the venue. By the time I was done with those two tasks, jetlag was already kicking in and the next thing I remember doing was setting my alarm for the next day.

I knew attending GHC would be awesome - but trust me, I was not prepared for what I saw when I arrived at the conference center on the first day. Thousands of women in tech, all in one place! The line to see the first keynote speakers was mind blowing!

I learnt a lot from attending talks and participating in hands on workshop on topics such as "How to negotiate!". The career fair gave me the opportunity to chat to companies and even to attend some very successful job interviews.

In the evenings I attended social networking events and met amazing women technologists. It was very empowering to listen to fellow women discuss how they have overcome challenges in the tech world and how much they have achieved.

Overall I had a blast and the time in Orlando was among the best times I had in 2017. I took a lot with me and most of it I apply in my everyday life.

depends greatly on what you already have at hand (e.g. a valid passport or an already granted visa) and also on your nationality (do you need to apply for a visa or do you qualify for ESTA).

We were kindly assisted by a travel agency in finding and booking flights and accommodation for our trip. Our flights back could be arranged so that those who wanted to were able to extend the stay for a few days after the conference (at our own cost of course). As we all had our official documents ready at different times we ended up flying to Orlando in pairs of two and were split on two different hotels both close to the convention center.

Personally I shared a room with Carmel and Fjoralba throughout the conference and I couldn't have wished for more amazing roommates! We got along really well and ended up having a great time chatting, planning our conference days together and exchanging our daily experiences in the evenings.

Our hotel was a 15 minute walk from the convention center, so most of the time we didn't take any transportation (and bravely walked by the - only slightly fear inducing - alligator warning signs along the way). However there were bus shuttles linking the convention center to several hotels in the area, which we used occasionally (mainly due to sudden and heavy rainfall). The cheapest and easiest way of getting around non-conference related was using Uber, as there is barely any public transportation in Orlando and taxis tend to be way more expensive.



In order to adjust to the time difference before the busy conference days we scheduled our flights so that we had a whole day to spend in Orlando before the conference started. Orlando is probably most famous for its theme parks. That is why after picking up our conference badges early in the morning, Carmel and I were headed to Disney's Magic Kingdom. We were very lucky as the lines were short that day and we got to do plenty of rides. Before returning to our hotel, to get some rest before the first day of GHC, we had some dinner at the Food & Wine Festival that was taking place at Epcot park during our stay.

We spend our time almost exclusively at the convention center while the conference lasted. In the daytime of course in order to attend sessions and make the most of the unique experience and atmosphere. In the evenings there were lots of social events organized by various companies that were open to anyone, most of them offering dinner options.

As Carmel and I both extended our stay we got to spend the day after the conference together as well. To wind down from

the busy days at Grace Hopper we decided to stroll around the Orlando botanical gardens, which was really nice.

Another one of my personal highlights was my tour to the Kennedy Space Center at Cape Canaveral. Especially after having attended a panel at GHC that discussed challenges in mission critical computing in space travel. Unfortunately I missed a rocket launch by one day (as I had already booked the tour from Orlando to KSC back in Germany before I left), but I got to see the actual launch pad, that will likely one day be used to send humans to Mars, as well as an original space shuttle (Atlantis). In the afternoon I had the amazing chance to meet and talk to a NASA astronaut who did two space shuttle missions in the 90s (fun fact: he actually spend the day I was born in space - how cool is that!?).



FJORALBA GOLIKJA

## NAVIGATING THE CONFERENCE

The conference program is one the most important aspects of the whole GHC experience. It obviously makes up most of the hours in a day spent at the conference. So it is really important to have a clear understanding of the schedule and structure beforehand.

My advice would be to go through the online conference schedule and have a glance at what is happening each day. You should be aware that this might feel a bit overwhelming as there are a lot of events happening throughout the day. But the online tool provides the option to filter the results using different criteria. It allows you for example to find all entries for specific themed tracks that you're interested in (such as AI, security, open source, software engineering and many more), your objectives (such as connection, inspiration, engagement or guidance) and most importantly your career level (such as student, executive or faculty). For example, I chose to look at the *Security & Privacy* track and went through all the events that were targeted at students.

However, you should not limit yourself to one specific track. That way you might find yourself attending sessions that focus on

aspects that you already have previous knowledge about and in the long run you might regard them as not really interesting in comparison to other topics discussed in parallel sessions.

For the ultimate organizer that prefers to not put off things until the last minute, I would suggest my friend Nathalie's method of making spreadsheets on all the interesting talks and events that you don't want to miss.

They say *don't judge a book by its cover* and this is partially true for GHC as well. Going through the schedule you can only see the session titles and names of the respective speakers. Sometimes however the titles do a great job attracting the audience, even though the actual content of the talk might not be that interesting after all. So it might be worthwhile to research a bit about the speakers as well.

One of the best pieces of advice that I received regarding attending sessions at the conference was that you should not be discouraged from leaving them early, if they are not meeting your expectations. It can be distracting to the speakers if the attendees do this all the time, so try to be discreet, but in the end, time is precious and there are at least ten parallel sessions that could be far more interesting.

With that in mind, you should always be prepared for some unexpected bits. In the end some of my favorite sessions were the ones that my friends and I decided to attend last minute (as you can tell I am not the organized one among my friends). I went to the conference with the expectation of finding out more about security and privacy and I left with not only that, but also knowing more on NASA flight software and balloon powered internet.

CARMEL KOZLOV

## SOCIALIZING AT GRACE HOPPER CELEBRATION

I was extremely lucky to be able to go to this conference with such amazing women. As Nathalie has already pointed out, she, Fjoralba and I shared a room, and this was the best decision we made for the trip.



The social aspect for me began even before arriving in Orlando - Nathalie and I were able to book the same flights. We sat together and entertained each other, before going through a fairly treacherous foray with the US customs in DC, barely catching our connecting flight. To say that we bonded through this experience is an understatement.

We arrived in Orlando to a very happy but jetlagged Fjoralba who was naturally waiting for us in the Harry Potter area of the Orlando International Airport. The three of us hopped in an Uber and made our way to the hotel. We could already tell that it was full of other ladies attending the conference and we were getting excited.

Fjoralba, Nathalie and I spent most of the conference together. For the opening session we caught very good spots in the waiting lines and even there we met other women and chatted with them while we were all waiting. It was interesting to hear why they were all at the conference and where they all came from. For the most part we found that the majority of the people attending the conference were American and they were very surprised to hear that we came all the way from Germany.

Attending panels was another place where we got to socialize. In one panel that the three of us attended together, I asked a question to the panelists, which spurred a lot of discussion at the end. A few of us stayed behind to continue the conversation with the panelists. I only got to experience this once during the conference which made it a special and unique moment for me.

Another cool aspect of the conference was the student lounge. We went there a few times to relax between sessions. The room was decked out with bean bags, charging stations, snacks and drinks. At one point we ran into another group of students from Munich and spent a couple of hours talking to them. We reflected together on the conference as well as our impressions of the US.

At one point during the conference we were walking back to the hotel. I approached a lady who was walking just ahead of us and asked her how she's



» WE SHOULD ALWAYS REMEMBER THAT WE SHOULD NOT ONLY START TO FEEL DESERVING OUR SUCCESS “ONCE WE COME IN 10TH IN A NATIONAL COMPETITION”.

PANELISTS & ABIE AWARD WINNERS  
DR. SUE BLACK & DR. MARIE DESJARDINS

been enjoying the conference. I found out that she was leading a team of engineers for Intel, working on stealth projects - she was only able to disclose that it was VR related - but she pulled up her phone and added me on LinkedIn. She proclaimed that if I was ever interested in a job at Intel in CA working on Virtual Reality I should shoot her a message. At another occasion - during a panel - I sat next to two ladies from Amazon who I chatted with - they also immediately added me on LinkedIn and told me that if I wanted a job at Amazon in Seattle to let them know, because their team was always looking. I connected with a lot of people over LinkedIn during this conference. As it turns out, a simple conversation at this conference may even lead to a job opportunity.



Of course we couldn't forgo going to the parties. The first one we attended was the Cisco Disco, which was a rooftop party at one of the hotels, loaded with drinks, food, a DJ, games and awesome atmosphere. At one point I snuck out to quickly catch up with a friend who had also been attending the conference and when I returned - I was shocked to find Nathalie and Fjoralba winning a game of giant jenga with a group of American students that they had met there. The rest of the night at the Cisco Disco was extremely enjoyable.

The second night of the conference we party hopped. We were trying to find the coolest parties. Our first attempt was to sneak into the Pixar party - but to our dismay it was invitation only. We quickly made our way to the Instagram party only to find out that this one too was invitation only. So we had to settle for the eBay party - where we met up with the other group of Munich students again and spent the night there. Although it was fun - in the back of our minds we were wondering how much cooler the Instagram and Pixar parties must have been. Looking back I



think this is where we really got into the spirit of things at Grace Hopper.



The closing party was sponsored by no other company than Google and it was an absolutely insane event. From the electric violinist and DJ duo, to the silent disco dance floor, games and food, Google went all out with this party. Again we met up with the group of German students we had met and danced the night away.

All in all, the conference was a blast. Everyone we had talked to was friendly, open and fun. The parties were enjoyable and the panelists were engaging. I don't have a doubt in my mind that the other TUM ladies that I got to go with made this conference 100 times better. My biggest advice would be to talk to as many people as possible and go to all the parties you can find. Try to not overthink the conference in advance, because all your plans will probably change once you arrive there. *Enjoy!*

**» DEFINE A VISION AND GOALS, THROW YOURSELF INTO REALIZING THEM AS FULLY AND AS POSSIBLY AS YOU CAN. TO SURROUND YOURSELF WITH PEOPLE AND SITUATIONS THAT YOU ENJOY. TO BE MINDFUL OF THE WORLD AS IT IS EVEN THOUGH YOU ARE PART OF CHANGING IT, THROUGH TECHNOLOGY!**

**DIANE GREENE, RECIPIENT OF THE TECHNICAL LEADERSHIP ABIE AWARD**

WE WOULD LIKE TO  
WHOLEHEARTEDLY THANK  
IFF FOR MAKING THIS  
**UNIQUE, INSPIRING,  
THOUGHT PROVOKING  
AND MIND OPENING  
EXPERIENCE** POSSIBLE FOR  
ALL OF US.

NOT ONLY DID WE GET  
THE CHANCE TO **GROW  
PROFESSIONALLY AND IN  
SELF-CONFIDENCE**, BUT  
ALSO TO **MAKE FRIENDS  
FOR LIFE.**

FJORALBA, CARMEL, ANNE & NATHALIE



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or have a read on Nathalie's blog on her personal conference highlights:

<https://www.unexpectedbit.com/2017/10/16/looking-back-grace-hopper-conference-2017/>