

# NEWSLETTER

Bulgarian-American Commission for Educational Exchange



**Invisible to the Eye,  
But Felt Strongly by the Heart**

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# Invisible to the Eye, But Felt Strongly in the Heart:

## Education Is Work-in-Progress for Life!

**An Interview with Fulbright Alumna Nellie Gencheva Gipson, a Continuing Believer and Supporter of Arts and Education**

by Angela Rodel

Nellie Gencheva Gipson was born in Sofia, Bulgaria, and is an arts and management professional now living in New York. As a Fulbright grantee in 1994-96, she earned a master's degree in arts administration for museum and galleries at NYU. She and her husband, Bob Gipson, are committed supporters of many educational and cultural organizations in the US and in Nellie's native Bulgaria through their Tianaderrah charitable foundation.

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***Nellie, you are a true "living bridge" between Bulgarian and American cultures – what first sparked your interest in the US?***

It's impossible to pick out a particular thing or moment that "sparked" my interest in the US, my first introduction to American culture was at the age of 13, when in the summer of 1973,

I arrived in New York City with my parents, who at that time were posted to work for the Commercial Section of the Bulgarian mission to UN. I am forever grateful to my parents that

they made a decision to enroll me in a local public school, Wagner Junior High School, for a full three years. As one might imagine, for an adolescent girl coming from a country “behind the iron curtain” and enrolling into a public school in New York City, there were so many new and different wonderful, yet complicated and challenging experiences, that made a profound impact and memories on my life. One significant example from that time is how the school embraced students of different background and culture. Wagner JHS provided tutoring in English for students like me, who didn’t speak the language, with volunteer teachers. I am truly grateful to Wagner for its way of treating students, regardless of where they came from or who their parents were. The important factor was education. In general anything that I’ve experienced while living in New York City at that period was uniquely new and educational. That personal relationship I developed with NYC continued later in my life, when in 1979 I had another chance to return to the United States and attend Hunter college getting my undergraduate degree in Art History, where almost all of the art classes were held in front of masterpieces in the city’s museums. This is the time when I became enchanted by the museums of New York and in particular the Metropolitan Museum of Art. This was the beginning of a spiritual “love affair” – the museums were my temples. I consider that encounter truly fortunate.

***How were you able to put your experience with US museum studies to good use upon your return to Bulgaria?***

Upon returning to Bulgaria in 1983, the transition was really challenging at that time. I couldn’t just immediately go out, present my US BA diploma and apply for a job. This was the

period of the Cold War between the East and the West. It took me more than a year and a half before I could find a job. Having lived and studied in the United States was looked upon as importing “capitalist propaganda,” not a welcoming factor at that time. However, with the help of good friends and sincere intentions eventually I began working as a museum guide at the then newly opened Ludmila Zhivkova National Foreign Art Gallery, now Square 500. I liked my work as a guide then, because it gave me a chance to be again in “my temple” – the museum. There were many visiting school groups and individual visitors, and also I was in constant contact with foreign visitors. Being an English-language guide, work was always interesting, intriguing and a life of discovery. I enjoyed my role as a “host” at the museum, interpreting the art, applying my knowledge about it by interacting with the visitors of all ages and all different places. In the process of showing the artworks and the exhibits, as a Bulgarian presenting them in English it made me feel like I was connecting different cultures. During my work there, I was exposed to many visitors of the entire sector of the society. The fact

is that as an English-language guide I conducted many tours for different groups of visitors of the diplomatic embassies in Sofia, this is how I first met representatives of the US Embassy. In my capacity of a museum professional who spoke English and having lived in America, I had to work closely with the cultural section of the US embassy for an exhibition which in 1988 was presented under a bilateral relationship between Bulgaria and the USA. That exhibition was color lithographs from the Tamarind Art Institute of Albuquerque, New Mexico. It was a very successful mutual event for the Gallery and its public. That work contact I made with the USIS section of the embassy later had a professional impact on my desire to pursue museum studies. In the autumn of 1989, I attended a month-long program for museum specialist in the USA. It was organized by the USIA, and together with a group of other museum professionals of eight different countries, we traveled through several major American cities to see museums and galleries and meet with the American colleagues, to talk and exchange views and opinions – it was a fascinating and stimulating international exchange program. The times were exciting – I was in Phoenix,



**An Indonesian dancer teaches Bulgaria students a traditional dance  
(Photo Credit: Krassimir Krustev)**

Arizona, when together with that group we watched the fall of the Berlin Wall on CNN. It was unbelievable what we watched on the screen!

***You began working in the Bulgarian museum sector during the socialist period. How did Bulgarian museums differ then from what you had seen in the US?***

That's a very complicated question. Times and history were different of the Bulgarian society. Most visits to museums or national memorials, homes of prominent artists or writers, and national heroes' homes, at the time when I was a student in elementary and middle school in Bulgaria were organized by schools. Growing up in Bulgaria I naturally visited a lot of those memorial "house-museums." The difference is that during that time, these museums did not have interactive programs, so-called "hands on" or anything that involved the children – students were expected to simply look and listen. It was a passive and honestly boring experience sometimes, especially for young visitors.

While living in the United States, I witnessed in person interactive educational programs in art museums. It is amazing how interesting and educational a single work of art, to say nothing of a whole collection, could be, even for the youngest audiences – that inspired me to continue my museum education and go further into it. What impressed me most about US museums back then were the interactive educational programs for children of all ages. That is why I decided that my research at NYU would be dedicated to ways of implementing educational programs in Bulgarian museums. More specifically, comparing the two different personal experiences - in Bulgarian museums and American ones, I aimed to design an art education program for the

International Gallery of Art in Sofia, where I used to work. Such programs did not exist then in Bulgaria – the teachers used to bring children only to look at the exhibition and leave, no interaction, whatsoever!

Today thankfully it is very different – for example, I have heard about museums in Russe and Plovdiv that have very strong interactive educational programs.

***How did you learn about the Fulbright program?***

That's also a long personal story. The first time I met a Fulbright fellow was actually a Bulgarian in NYC when I was a student at Hunter. That Fulbrighter was Prof. Pavlina Dokovska, who was then a student of piano at Juilliard. We became good friends. Later when I was working at the cultural section of the US Embassy in Sofia in the early 1990s, truly historic times, I met many US Fulbright fellows coming to Bulgaria. That was also the time when the Fulbright Commission was beginning to be established in Sofia. My involvement with that process as well as many other work-related assignments was fascinating, another enjoyable, learning experience because it was a very positive and optimistic time of building relationships and strengthening understanding between the two cultures. I was truly convinced that in my work duties, I was a living bridge between Bulgaria and the US – it is something invisible to the eyes but I felt it so strongly in my heart, and continue to feel that way today! It's impossible to separate one's private life from professional engagements – look how we are learning to do that today in these complicated times of COVID-19.

While working at the Embassy, during this stimulating time of social change, I was also a young mother and a wife. Work and family life are always so intertwined. A sudden

tragedy in the family can have an impact in numerous ways. My first husband died unexpectedly. My private and professional life were subjected to significant change. I was faced with chaos and a mountain of unpredictability! At moments like that, life continues and who knows what inspires or influences one's decision and actions?

This is the time I dared to entertain the idea of applying for a Fulbright scholarship. I had to resign from my job at the embassy because of the conflict of interest. I applied to NYU's museum and galleries arts administration master's program. For the Fulbright program, my application essay presented a vision of establishing a cultural institution in Bulgaria based on the model of the NEA (National Endowment for the Arts), which would support the visual arts and adopt best practices from the museum tradition of the US. In the summer of 1994, my daughter Milla and I arrived in NYC to start my academic program. It was another life-testing period – a time of stimulating hard work and building new memories!

During the summer of my first year as a Fulbrighter, I had a chance to do an internship with the Open Society Institute in NYC. I continued working later there and implemented my NYU thesis as a pilot project. It was presented to Open Society Institute-Sofia and the Soros Center for Contemporary Arts (SCCA), and the program TransArt or "Transcending Borders through Art" in Bulgaria began at the National Gallery for Foreign Art in Sofia. Based on that project, a true three-way partnership was formed: between the Sixth Elementary School Graf Ignatiev, SCCA, and the National Art Gallery for Foreign Art. The program was very new and captivating, a real precedent for that time. It involved a series of student visits to the exhibition halls, talks with





Students in the TransArt workshop  
(Photo Credit: Krassimir Krustev)



Participants create their own artworks inspired by the exhibit  
(Photo Credit: Krassimir Krustev)

the artists in front of the art objects, and afterwards students creating their own art work for an exhibition.

This project was very successful. It was presented in other countries which were part of the OSI network. TransArt was adapted according to the museums in these countries. We will need more time if I'm to describe the process of this implementation- maybe in a second interview!

***In New York City, it seems you also found a life partner who shares your passion for education!***

Yes, as I said earlier, life is life – the private goes along hand-in-hand with the professional. I met my future husband Bob Gipson and at the time when we got married in 2001, he had already founded the family Tianaderrah Foundation, dedicated to education, history preservation and conservation. It was natural for me to embrace and get involved with the family foundation and for Bob to fall in love with Bulgaria. Through the foundation and personal friendships, we became very much involved with educational and cultural projects in the country. One of the foundation's first involvement in Bulgaria was providing a donation to acquire secure museum cases for displaying precious ancient artifacts at the Archeological Museum in Sofia. At that time we

met and worked with Professor Vassil Nikolov. We became very good friends and now through the support of the Tianaderrah foundation we continue to be involved with another project under his leadership – the Neolithic site Solnicite (saltworks) in Provadia. Another long-standing partnership is with Michael Tachev, the executive director of SS Cyril and Methodius foundation. We established scholarships for high school students who want to continue their education at Bulgarian universities. Michael and his team have been excellent partners in running that project for more than 15 years now! Bob and I enjoy so much meeting with the students who receive these scholarships when we visit Sofia.

Another educational institution very dear to our hearts is the American College of Sofia! It has its own special history for many Bulgarians and Americans! It is the oldest American educational institution in Bulgaria, established in the 1860s. Another life story that deserves its own time and place for interview, perhaps. currently I'm a trustee on the board of ACS. I stay in touch with many alumni who come to the US to study, as well as with alumni who work and live in Sofia. Bob and I have welcomed many of them to our home in the States.

***Are you still actively involved in museum education?***

I continue my interest in museums and art both in Bulgaria and the US. For more than 15 years I have been a volunteer at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. I'm also professionally involved with the Institute of the Study of the Ancient World (ISAW), which is affiliated with NYU. And I'm a trustee on the board of the Fenimore Art Museum in Cooperstown, NY.

***What was the greatest impact of your Fulbright experience?***

I'm so grateful to The Fulbright Program. It is a life-changing factor. It helped me fulfill my dreams about making a difference for museums in Bulgaria. I consider education to be one of the strongest components of a person's character, the Fulbright experience helped me focus on that – education is a work-in-progress for life, it keeps the spirit young! I hope I have passed that on to my daughter and now to keep it going to my grandsons. I am looking forward to future work with Fulbright, supporting Bulgarian students! Thank you for your interview.

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