

AFS Returnee Honored by
German Government

Jürgen Blankenburg: Thinking Outside the Box

An Interview by Christine Vogel



After a lifetime of dedication to both the arts and AFS, Jürgen Blankenburg—an AFS Returnee from Germany to USA—was recently awarded the Officer's Cross of the Federal Cross of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany for his lifelong engagement in the arts.

Since 1996, Jürgen Blankenburg has been chairman of the board of the *Stiftung für die Hamburger Kunstsammlungen*. Created in 1956, the Foundation has since acquired 400 great works of art for Hamburg's museums.

After having been one of the founders of the German AFS Foundation, Jürgen has also been chairman of the AFS Foundation, Zürich, Switzerland—since its inception in 2004—an independent entity of the AFS Network that endeavors to preserve the legacy of AFS and the American Field Service.

Jürgen Blankenburg is a very interesting man. “I rather enjoy being at the center of controversy,” he shared, as he explained how the Art Circle of the German Federation of Industries, where he is also active, had first given great works of art to the war-devastated museums of Hamburg and then, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, had asked these same museums to share their collections with their counterparts in what had been the German Democratic Republic. “I believe it was the right thing to do,” he asserted, “but it was not a universally popular idea.” Besides his wife Monika—a psychiatrist, cellist, and member of the Board of the German Music Foundation—there have been two passions central to his life—art and AFS. What do these last two have in common when seen through the eyes of the man who executes both of his chairmanships with distinction? During an interview in his art-filled Hamburg home, Jürgen explained the pleasure he takes in being confronted with new ideas. He discovered this as a 17-year-old in 1952, when he was welcomed in Birmingham, AL, as an AFS post-war exchange student and experienced “affluence shock.”

“My AFS experience was preparation for the arts. The open-mindedness that was required and developed during my exchange year is the main connection. Coming from a destroyed city here in Germany, living in rubble, coming to a Southern city in the United States that had enjoyed peace since 1865, but had deep memories of war from the American Civil War—a city struggling with Civil Rights—that required a great deal of openness in order to digest quite a different world.”

“My sojourn in America had a major impact on my life.” The understated man, who radiates clarity and quiet strength, explained, “The notion that things could be seen or done differently has been central to my thinking throughout my life.”

While in Birmingham, Jürgen Blankenburg's host father told him the importance of “getting involved.” This lesson, too, has obviously stayed with him, and he has been very successful in engaging the affluent of

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Hamburg in joining him in his work on behalf of the arts.

“Where I am interested, I have to be engaged,” he explained. “When I came to Hamburg, I was interested in photography, which I had been collecting. I asked to see a photo from the museum’s archives, and they told me they had no room in which to show it. We collected money to renovate the museum so that they would have a gallery in which to show photographs. That was in the 1980s.” Looking at the enormous art collection that covers the walls of the Blankenburg residence, I remembered the line from the *Die Welt* story about Jürgen written by Katja Engler that had run in October: The author had

observed that “Thinking outside the box is something Blankenburg puts into practice: for him, the freedom of thought is at least as important as the resulting creations of mind.”

As though to confirm this idea, Jürgen continued, “The arts confront us with new and unusual ideas. Artists have new ideas and make you think along unbeaten paths. You need that in many sections of your life—business, personal life, and also in AFS. Whether you are an exchange student or a member of the Board of Trustees, you have to find solutions to unique problems. Art was never the center of my life—business was, said the longtime insurance broker, manager, and business graduate. “But, you have your hobbies.”

A former member of the AFS

International Board of Trustees and of AFS Germany’s *Kuratorium*—an advisory board of experienced leaders in business and politics—Jürgen acknowledged how deeply his AFS experience helped to set the course of his life, “I developed lifelong friendships through AFS. I still visit my family in Birmingham each year. And my friend Uli Weiss—also an AFS Returnee, former AFS International Trustee, and founding member of the *Kuratorium*—was on my bus trip in 1952.”

Before we left, Jürgen explained, “At the end of my exchange year, I was asked to stay in Birmingham. I said, ‘I can’t do that. I received a scholarship and I must give back to Germany.’ My American father understood.” 