

In December 2013, Sarah Lucht went to Stockholm...

# The Sarah Lucht Story

By John Bechtel  
Freelance writer

Sarah was a senior with a 4.0 GPA with a double major in chemistry, biochemistry, and molecular biology at Gustavus Adolphus College, a four-year private college in St. Peter, Minnesota. The college had a lot to do with why Sarah was on her way to Stockholm.

Originally a Swedish elementary school, Gustavus Adolphus College was founded in 1862 and after several name and location changes, it opened for college level classes in its present location in 1876. Within a hundred years it became formally affiliated with the Lutheran Church of America and it continues to maintain its Swedish and Lutheran connections.

## The Swedish Heritage Colleges

Gustavus Adolphus College is one of six heritage colleges founded by Swedes that maintain an active connection with modern Scandinavia through language study, student exchange programs, and cultural events. All six colleges are institutional members of the Swedish Council of America (SCA), an umbrella organization for Swedish-American activities nationwide that provides grants to organizations and scholarships to students. California Lutheran University, which has been featured before in this magazine, is also one of these six colleges. (See <https://tinyurl.com/ydew428o>.)



PHOTO: ISWEEP

**2015 SIYSS winners in Stockholm, Sweden gather for group photo during Nobel Week. An intense week of scientific activities, cultural exchange, and a unique opportunity to meet the Nobel Laureates. SIYSS is widely considered one of the most prestigious youth science events in the world.**



Gustavus Adolphus College is unique in that its annual Nobel Conference was the first ongoing conference to receive the imprimatur of the Nobel Foundation in Stockholm. Every year thousands from all over the world flock to Gustavus Adolphus College to hear leading scientists and Nobel laureates speak on scientific and

social issues. However, this university conference and intellectual milieu was only the beginning of the Nobel experience in the life and career of Sarah Lucht.

## The SIYSS Experience

The Stockholm International Youth Science Seminar (SIYSS) is an annual week-long event somewhat similar to the Nobel Conference at Gustavus Adolphus College, but held in Stockholm to coincide with the recognition of the new laureates during Nobel Week. Twenty-five of the world's leading young scientists are selected, based on science fairs and recommendations from top-ranking

PHOTO: YOUTUBE

Gustavus Adolphus College, St. Peter, Minnesota



PHOTO: TANDEM TREE PHOTOGRAPHY



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universities, to travel to Stockholm to participate in banquets, gala events, and to present the results of their own research to a large number of their peers. Of these 25 outstanding students invited annually to the SIYSS event, only ONE student is sent to represent the Swedish Council of America (SCA) by being awarded the SCA Glenn T. Seaborg Scholarship. Sarah Lucht was only the eighth student from Gustavus Adolphus College in Saint Peter, Minnesota to be awarded this scholarship.

## The Nobel Week

Here's how Sarah describes her experience of being awarded the most prestigious student ticket in the world immediately after the experience:

"My week in Stockholm was filled with wonderful opportunities to learn about Swedish science and culture, my fellow international participants, and the history of the Nobel prizes. . . The Nobel Prize festivities spanned the entire week. We had the opportunity to attend a press conference with the three winners of the Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine as well as the Nobel Lectures by the Economics, Chemistry, Literature, and Physics winners. It was inspirational to hear

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PHOTO: UNGA FORSKARE

The Stockholm International Youth Science Seminar (SIYSS) coincides with the events during Nobel Week in Sweden.



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“The Nobel Prize festivities spanned the entire week. We had the opportunity to attend a press conference with the three winners of the Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine as well as the Nobel Lectures by the Economics, Chemistry, Literature, and Physics winners. It was inspirational to hear pioneers in each field talk about their research. We also attended the Nobel Reception at the Nordiska Museet, which was a time to mingle with the Laureates and other notable invitees. . . In addition to the group SIYSS activities, the American citizens were invited to the U.S. Ambassador to Sweden’s residence for a reception honoring the American Nobel Laureates. It was surreal to meet the Laureates in such an intimate environment and I was able to ask them questions one-on-one.

”While the lectures and receptions were incredible events in themselves, they cannot compare to the Nobel Prize Ceremony, Banquet, and Night Cap. After a day getting ready and taking photographs, we went via limo to the Stockholm Concert Hall for the Ceremony. It was a beautiful sight to have everyone dressed up in ball gowns and tails! After the Ceremony, we traveled to the Stockholm City Hall for the Nobel Prize Banquet. I have never been to such an elaborate and fancy dinner! The food was wonderful and had a lobster theme. An opera trio performed in between courses and afterwards we moved up to the Golden Hall to dance.

“Overall, this experience was indescribable and memorable. I will forever be grateful to the Swedish Council of America for choosing me to receive the Glenn T. Seaborg Science Award. I made many connections with other young scientists that I plan to stay in touch with and was inspired to continue working diligently in science!”

### Five Years Later

Five years later, Sarah reflects back on this part of her life in an interview with Scandinavian Press:

■ **SP: Are you Swedish and how would you describe the influence of Swedish-ness in your home? Was Swedish spoken?**

I have Swedish heritage through my mom’s side—everyone on that side is descended from Swedish immigrants who arrived in the United States in the second half of the 19th century. As far as I know, my grandfather grew up speaking Swedish at home, but my mom and her siblings did not. I would describe the “Swedish-ness” of that side of the family as “high.” While the tradition of eating lutefisk at Christmas ended before I was born (for which I am very grateful), we always had pickled herring, potatis korv, and Swedish meatballs at holidays - along with pepparkokker. My grandparents were long-standing members of the American Swedish Institute in Minneapolis and actively participated in the Småland and Värmland societies, the regions where their families originally emigrated from. With the Värmland group, there was a tradition that families of members were invited to join for the Christmas meeting, where a Swedish dinner and Lucia pageant was held. As grandkids, we always loved going along to roam around the mansion and to participate through the years as tomten, starboys/girls, attendants, and then finally Lucia. My mother and cousins were also involved in a Swedish girls choir (Svenkarnas Dag girls choir), which goes on regular tours around Sweden. We often attended the Svenkarnas Dag midsommer celebrations in Minneapolis, and every Christmas

of my childhood, my family was very involved in putting on an early morning Christmas service (Julotta) at Brookdale Covenant Church. As grandkids, we were often wrangled into singing a few Christmas songs in Swedish for the service. I also ended up attending Gustavus Adolphus College, which was founded by Swedish immigrants, for my undergraduate degree.

So we could say that, despite several generations of separation from the direct Swedish immigrants, I grew up with a strong sense of Swedish heritage.

■ **SP: Was your Nobel Week trip your first visit to Sweden?**

The Nobel Week trip in December 2013 was not my first trip to Sweden. During the summer between 8th and 9th grade, my family went on a trip to Europe, where we stopped in Sweden to visit Stockholm and see my cousins, who were there touring with the Swedish choir. I was also blessed to complete a one month internship in Stockholm at Karolinska Institute in January 2013, where I spent the month living in Solna. I actually was living in Iceland on a Fulbright grant for the 2013-2014 academic year, so I traveled from there to Stockholm for Nobel week and in early 2014 went back with my in-laws to visit Stockholm as well as southern Sweden, where their families are from.

■ **SP: When did you first hear about the Seaborg award?**

I first heard about the Seaborg award during my junior year at Gustavus Adolphus College in St. Peter, Minnesota, when my good friend Dawn Comstock received the award in 2012. I was intrigued by the combination of Swedish heritage—which I had always



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Canada’s Donna Strickland escorted by Sweden’s King Carl XVI Gustav.

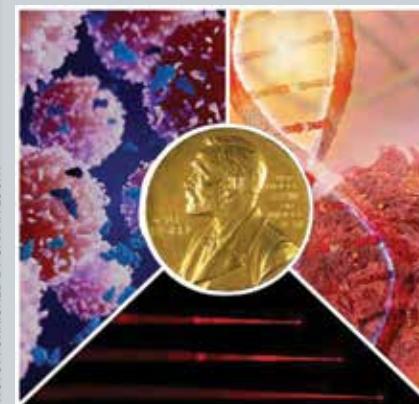


PHOTO: FURNISHED BY SARAH LUCHT

PHOTO: NOBELPRIZE.ORG

valued in my family, and science, which I was studying—I was a Chemistry and Biochemistry & Molecular Biology double major. I followed-up with the scholarship director at Gustavus, Dr. Alisa Rosenthal, who thought it was a great idea to apply and was instrumental in helping me craft my application.

■ **SP: How would you describe the emotional impact of your experience?**

Emotionally, I found the experience wonderfully overwhelming. As much as I had applied myself in high school and college, there was still a strong sense of Imposter Syndrome that arose when surrounded by such illustrious people - especially if you are currently experiencing doubts or considering changing your research topic and area. After finishing my degrees in chemistry and biochemistry in June 2013, I left my undergraduate work feeling unsure as to whether I wanted to continue in lab research and very interested in looking into epidemiology, particularly cancer epidemiology. The work I was doing in Iceland was a combination of lab and epidemiology, so when I went to the Nobel Week, I was sitting at a sort of crossroads. I had already been admitted to the Harvard T. H. Chan School of Public Health to do a Masters in Epidemiology focusing in cancer, but I was still unsure about the decision to move out of the lab. Being able to present my work in front of 500+ Swedish high school students, seeing the work of the other young scientists, listening to the laureate’s lectures, and being able to meet several of the laureates was truly inspiring,

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Laureates honored at 2018 Nobel Prize Ceremony in Stockholm, Sweden.

PHOTO: NOBELPRIZE.ORG



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and I left the week feeling motivated to continue in my own work but also somewhat overwhelmed by all of the amazing ongoing research. It was easy to compare my current journey, where I was preparing to make a career shift, with that of Nobel prize-winning researchers, who seemed so sure and focused. I distinctly remember asking Dr. Randy Shekman, who won the prize in Medicine that year, about whether it was possible to combine the big data approach of public health and also be in the lab doing basic science, and he responded that I most likely had to choose because a person's time is finite. While not ground-breaking advice, it did reassure me that I was making the right decision to choose one—there aren't any guarantees in life, but I was most certainly never going to know if epidemiology was a good fit for me if I never gave it a try. While being thoroughly impressed with all of the award winners (and slightly nervous about making small talk with such distinguished people), my most fond memory of chatting was with Dr. Michael Levitt, where we talked about how life living in Iceland was interesting and commiserated about the difficulties of (at that time) not being able to connect to Netflix from certain countries in the world. We even later emailed about some potential solutions to the problem. While that 2-minute conversation was not life-changing, it was a wonderfully reassuring moment showing that even Nobel laureates are normal people (and need access to their favorite shows). After returning to Iceland after the Nobel Week, the time spent there felt surreal. It was as though that week existed in another world - one where it was normal to put on a ball gown, chat with world-leading researchers, and make new friends among young scientists from around the world - and now I was suddenly back to my everyday routine. I was left with a great sense of gratitude for the opportunity that I had been given through the Seaborg award, as it was clear that very few people are ever able to attend the Nobel Prize ceremonies and to have the honor to meet such wonderful and inspiring change-makers.

■ **SP: The intellectual impact?**

I found the whole experience incredibly intellectually stimulating. Not only was I surrounded by other young scientists who were engaged in their own research, I was able to attend the various lectures given by the laureates as well as to meet and network with many other scientists. I loved being able to share my current research with high school students and to hopefully inspire them to go into science. Presenting

in front of so many people gave me confidence for future presentations, and knowing that I had been chosen to be among a small group of students who would have this opportunity was a reassuring recognition that I must be doing something right in my work and research. I was very inspired by the creativity of my fellow young scientists and the Nobel prize winners—I think creativity is often overlooked as an important skill in science and it was encouraging to see them emphasize the many creative solutions they developed to answer difficult questions. I left feeling inspired to continue doing my work and perhaps one day hoping to make even a tenth as much of a difference as all of the prize winners had.

■ **SP: The networking benefit?**

In terms of networking, I found the Nobel Week to be a good challenge. It was not particularly difficult to get to know and connect with the other young scientists, but it was certainly a useful growing experience to be thrown into a group of very illustrious strangers, such as at the U.S. Embassy reception for American laureates, and expected to navigate the networking sphere. I was extremely grateful to have had a mother who taught us how to engage in conversation with strangers, and while I cannot say it was always perfectly comfortable, I truly enjoyed having the opportunity to strike up a conversation with so many people from around the world. It increased my self-confidence and has served as a great learning experience since then, as I have had to use those networking skills during graduate school at Harvard and now as I complete my PhD at Heinrich Heine University in Dusseldorf, Germany. I have also stayed in contact with several of the young scientists I met through the program and have met up with several since 2013.

■ **SP: The number of local heritage service clubs and organizations across North America has decreased dramatically over the last few decades. In your personal case, where you mingle constantly with people from all over the globe, how do you place a value on your Swedishness?**

Interestingly enough, I recently had a conversation about this very topic two weeks ago with a friend. He felt that our obsession as Americans to connect with our 'roots' can be a rather self-centered and shallow pursuit, especially if no true heritage has been handed down over the generations. While I agree that adopting cultural traditions purely based on recently discovered genetic heritage is rather absurd, I loved growing up with a strong sense of my Swedish

heritage. I value the traditions that have been carried down through generations and the connection that gives me to the people who have gone before me. My grandpa always used to remind us, particularly when we exhibited some sense of superiority or pride, that we were descended from poor Swedish peasants and we shouldn't forget it.

**There is something wonderfully comforting and connecting about sharing in traditions that were also carried out by your parents, your grandparents, your great-grandparents, etc. It is fascinating to read about ancestors and the difficulties they faced in Sweden as well as after their arrival in the U.S. (my grandfather put together all of his research into a very long packet).**

That said, I am also strongly in favor of people visiting the regions or countries where their ancestors came from—it is fascinating to consider the different trajectories that led to some Swedish citizens emigrating and some staying.

**I love visiting Sweden and seeing the current traditions from the lens of my removed American-Swedish experiences because it gives me a different sense of connection with the place where my ancestors lived. It makes the 'genetic' connection real in a way that googling "Swedish Traditions" and adopting them would not. In my daily life, where I mingle with people from around the world, people are always surprised to hear that my family has such strong connections to our Swedish heritage.**

~ **Epilogue** ~

From wealthy business magnates to the volunteer work of countless committees and task forces, it is impossible to quantify the benefits that are conveyed to future generations of Americans because of the donors' generosity. If the Nordic heritage is to be preserved, organizations like the Swedish Council of America must continue to be supported.

