

Building Community in 2020: The Harriman Institute's Student Mentorship Program

By Masha Udensiva-Brenner



Pictured, top: Dora Chomiak; bottom: Ben Cohen.

Dora Chomiak met Ben Cohen (MARS-REERS, 2022) in ultimate 2020 fashion—in a Zoom breakout room at a mixer for incoming students and Harriman Institute National Advisory Council members. The students and council members were divided into Zoom rooms and reshuffled every few minutes. “It was kind of like speed dating,” says Chomiak, who has been on the Advisory Council since 2017. “Exactly the cocktail-party-length conversation you want to have.”

Chomiak is president of Razom, a nonprofit organization that supports development, entrepreneurship, and media initiatives in Ukraine, which she describes as “a nonprofit with a startup attitude.” When Cohen entered her breakout room, she was immediately struck by how interested he was in Ukraine and by how much he knew about current developments there.

Cohen was struck by Chomiak, too. He has been fascinated with Ukraine since studying there in a Russian-language intensive course as an undergraduate in 2013 and then on a Fulbright Fellowship to study historical memory in 2016. As he learned about Chomiak’s involvement in Razom, he was thinking, “this is someone I need to get to know right away.”

After the mixer, he emailed Chomiak and she responded. It was summer, coronavirus numbers in New York City were low, and the two decided to connect in person. Chomiak rode her bicycle from the West Village and met Cohen in Riverside Park. They had a great time discussing Ukraine and soon after were paired in the Harriman Institute’s mentorship program.

The two-year-old program, still in its pilot stages, connects students with practitioners in their fields of interest. Chomiak, who has participated from the beginning and had already mentored two students before Cohen, says that the program not only helps students meet new people and learn more about their chosen field; it has also helped her gain new perspectives on her own experiences. “When you’re in conversation with someone who is in a different place in their career, it makes you rethink where you are and where you’ve been,” she says. “I get a lot out of it.”

Cohen will be entering his second year at the Institute in the fall. He didn’t know about the program when he applied to the Institute and says he feels grateful for the guidance it provides—recently, he met Chomiak for coffee to discuss his thesis. “Regional studies is a broad field, and it can be really overwhelming to figure out what to do next,” he says. “Having a mentor, and knowing there is someone there to help me, really alleviates some of that pressure.”

Chomiak sees the program as a valuable tool for Harriman students, alumni, and other practitioners in the field. “My hope is that it builds a global community of people who are knowledgeable and passionate about that part of the world,” she says. ■