



INTERNATIONAL EXCHANGE

NAME

MICHELLE GARCIA

FROM

USA

TO

COLOMBIA

DURATION

10 DAYS



0123456789



At the Table and On the Bus in Colombia

For some, riding the bus is just a way to get from point A to point B, but for many people with disabilities whom Michelle Garcia meets, it's a vehicle for empowerment. Michelle, who organizes Latinos with disabilities at Access Living of Metropolitan Chicago, educates the community, people with disabilities, and their families about independent living and getting the opportunity to experience, for example, riding public transportation on one's own.

In Colombia, where Michelle traveled for 10 days as part of a U.S. Department of State sponsored professional exchange program, the path to independence was not as straightforward. Few options for accessible transportation existed, and those that did were expensive.

Michelle's mode of transportation while there was an ambulance-like van with a power ramp, and getting around on the cobblestones required a personal assistant and stops to recharge the battery for her power wheelchair much more often than if she were at home.

"Forget the buses – over there they were small and not accessible. It was surprising that they didn't have a paratransit system for people with disabilities either. Access to transportation was one of the projects we wanted to work on. We needed to get people with disabilities to realize they have a voice to ask for these things."

Colombia has national laws on accessibility, but they're rarely, if ever, enforced. In Bogota, she was told how a committee that makes decisions on transportation and other issues included no members with disabilities.

"This city committee doesn't see the problem because they don't face the issues. People with disabilities should be at the table."

Michelle shared this strategy with Colombian partner organizations, Arcangeles Foundation for Integral Rehabilitation and Human Rights Research Group at Rosario University Law School. They are trying to create an advocacy center for those who come for rehabilitation services, in order to make more effective changes in the community.





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In the United States, Michelle knows she can organize protests to push for action, but when she began to talk about the use of non-violent civil disobedience, she immediately saw the need to be careful. The partner organizations in Colombia warned that taking similar action could get them in serious trouble under national laws. While public strikes happen, as Michelle witnessed while in Bogota, the government response can include military force and curfews.

Instead the partners organized a forum on accessible transportation issues and invited these city committee members to speak. As one result, Arcangeles Foundation for Integral Rehabilitation now has a person with a disability going to every committee meeting and being the voice of people with disabilities in the community.

“There’s still a long way to having accessible buses, but at least it’s starting to move something forward.”

By also hosting the Colombian partners in Chicago for a short visit, Michelle could show them the city’s accessible transportation systems (that she now appreciates much more having been abroad). She also introduced them to a group of people with disabilities she gathers; the group discusses how to approach public officials or even a grocery store owner, for example, to enforce accessibility laws. This gave the Colombian partners the idea to start a similar group in Bogota.

The partners also began inquiring with Colombians with disabilities who were coming for rehabilitation services, “How did you get here? Was it difficult to get here? What are the barriers you encounter daily?” For one younger girl, lack of accessible transportation was a barrier to going to

school each day or arriving on time. This signaled that they were on the right track with priority issues.

Michelle also learned some new workshop ideas from the Colombian partners to make a point to the general population about what it feels like to be segregated from others. She hopes to work with community organizers in other countries too, to exchange ideas and strategies in the future.

“This was my first exchange experience and I’d love to do it again. I’m of the idea that you need to reach people who work in a range of fields, from immigration, education, employment, and health care, so that they can understand how these topics impact the disability community.”

The solution may not always be straightforward, whether in the United States or elsewhere, but Michelle’s resolve to empower disability advocates shows clear determination to find a road forward.



Learn About The Empower Partnerships For Inclusive Communities Exchange

exchanges.state.gov/non-us/program/empower-program