



INTERNATIONAL EXCHANGE

NAME
SEAN WHALEN

FROM USA **TO** NICARAGUA

DURATION
3 MONTHS

0123456789



Compelled to Do More in a Complex World

Catching a wave in the Caribbean. Cruising down the slopes of a volcano. Zipping through rainforests along a cable. Reading a textbook. When you think of extreme adventure, one of these is not like the other. Yet what Sean Whalen discovered while traveling is that, for blind people in Nicaragua, accessing one of these activities is perceived to be a near-impossible challenge – and it’s not the one you’d expect.

Sean didn’t know what to expect on his first journey abroad, so he focused on the usual.

“I wondered how easy it would be to get around, what people’s reactions would be to me, and how different it would be from what I’m used to in the United States.”

What he discovered in Nicaragua was the travel concerns ended up being much less of an issue, for which he now admits he may have over prepared. Instead, he found himself grappling more with the cultural contradictions he discovered there.

Sean, who is blind, traveled for several weeks with a small group from the United States to do interviews with organizations working on behalf of blind people in the country, with government officials, and with blind school children and their families.

He learned of this opportunity through an alumna of Harvard University’s Kennedy School of Government, where he was a graduate student. Sean was looking for a summer internship, and as luck would have it, a Boston-based non-profit was looking for someone with policy experience to assess its viability to run programs in Nicaragua.

Before traveling, Sean learned Nicaragua’s constitution provides equal access to everyone in education, including students with disabilities. The reality of what he found on the ground was quite different.

Lack of resources contributed to disabled students being pulled out of school at an early age or left without access to assistive technology. He also sensed a

lack of societal expectation, especially in rural areas, that a person with a disability can have independence or a professional life.

“I think it has given me a perspective on how important good policy can be and how also having things on paper that look great won’t necessarily translate into good outcomes in reality.”

People he met in Nicaragua were surprised to see Sean navigating the community with his cane and to learn that he was a university student with a career living on his own. Ironically, when he went ziplining, surfing, hiking or volcano boarding, none of the locals or tour guides seemed too concerned that he was blind.

“If I went anywhere in the United States to do that, there would be a safety concern and a big fight just to get to do it like anyone else. But in Nicaragua, it was, ‘Here’s five dollars’ and ‘Here’s your board.’ It was strange – it felt really good and in that moment I thought, ‘You think I can do this, but you don’t think your son, if he had a disability, could go to school?’”

As president of the National Association of Blind Students, a division of the National Federation of the Blind in the United States, Sean is heavily engaged in working on a volunteer basis on policy issues on the education of blind people.

This includes a lot of work on access to technology in the classroom, though on a far different level than what is needed in Nicaragua. Until this point, he has seen his policy work as domestically focused. His overseas experience has caused him to question whether that is enough.

“There’s just a far greater need out there, and I wonder what responsibility I have, do we have, to be aware of that need and to help when we can. I think I’d have a broader perspective if I’d had the nerve to go abroad earlier in my life.”

After graduation, Sean, who is eager to make up for lost time, headed back to Nicaragua with the same non-profit for six months and will be seizing more opportunities to travel and engage in advocacy efforts abroad in the future.

