



INTERNATIONAL  
EXCHANGE

NAME

ALEXANDRA FUTTY

FROM

USA

TO

TRINIDAD

DURATION

ACADEMIC YEAR



0123456789



# Explore the World Around You

Alexandra Futti has always been determined to not lead a “small life.” As a senior in high school she raised \$10,000 and convinced her parents and Catholic school to allow her take a half year to go on a cultural exchange to India.

“I grew up in a small town in Ohio that was very homogenous, very working class, very white, very Christian. And my whole life I have straddled the place between the sighted and non-sighted. I always felt this strong sensation that there was a larger world than what I experienced.”

Alexandra’s explorations continued as a senior in college when she went to Trinidad for two months to do independent research for her undergraduate thesis. After graduation, she spent a year in Trinidad on a Fulbright Student scholarship, sponsored by the U.S. Department of State. As a result, she has now defined her career path.

## My gears shifted significantly during my Fulbright program. I had to go far away to realize what I wanted to do at home.

By the time she participated in the Fulbright program, Alexandra’s vision had decreased more and she needed additional disability-related accommodations. The Massachusetts Agency for the Blind provided Alexandra with assistance to purchase the technology she needed for her research. This included a scanner to convert print to electronic text and a braille

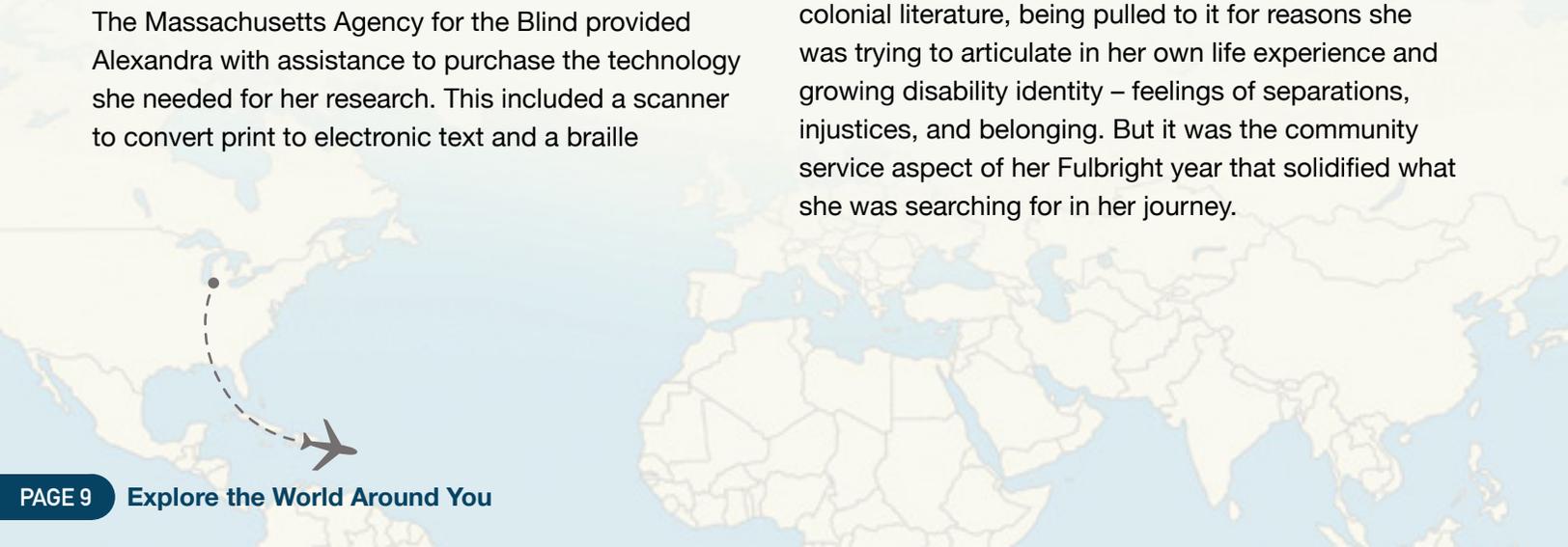
refreshable display to connect with her computer and smartphone to convert text from the screen into braille on the display.

Before arriving, she also reached out to blind associations in Trinidad to arrange orientation and mobility lessons to learn how to navigate the campus. Most mornings Alexandra would walk down her street with her cane to catch a route taxi downtown. From there, she got a bus or maxi taxi at the main bus terminal up to the university and then walked to her classes.

She admits it can be difficult to get around in communities abroad, especially as a woman or where American tourists and those with disabilities are not commonly seen. In Trinidad she dealt with difficult comments directed to her on the street by taking cues from Trinidadian women who joke and call back to help break the tension. Alexandra also found it helpful to make friends with the locals for getting around and going places together.

“Days where I didn’t have classes, I often went around Port of Spain and sat at a roti shop to eat and talk to people. I trusted most people are good and made smart decisions; I was not afraid to go out and talk with people very different from myself, and that is how I learned things.”

Alexandra’s research focused on Caribbean and post-colonial literature, being pulled to it for reasons she was trying to articulate in her own life experience and growing disability identity – feelings of separations, injustices, and belonging. But it was the community service aspect of her Fulbright year that solidified what she was searching for in her journey.





She began volunteering at the country's school for blind children, teaching braille and showing the students that they could aspire to doing more than staying at home as adults. She ended up loving every moment. The cultural interactions she had each day with the children challenged her to explain what the sun is when the heat never ceased, or why her hair felt as it did to the Afro-Caribbean children.

"These were concepts that if you had sight are inherent, but for these kids are not as obvious – so I got to explore and talk with these kids about so many interesting topics."

Since the special education training in Trinidad doesn't include a focus on teaching blind children, Alexandra found it "heart-wrenching" that despite the teachers' good intentions, they didn't have the information to give to the students what was needed.

She ultimately decided to apply to graduate school at Northern Illinois University to become a teacher of blind and low vision students, and hopes to do international advocacy work in the future.

I started thinking: 'Teaching is something I could do every day and I'd be happy doing it.' I started really understanding myself as a person with a disability and all the pieces of my experience came together.

