



INTERNATIONAL
EXCHANGE

NAME

HABEN GIRMA

FROM

USA

TO

MALI

PROGRAM

BuildOn Volunteer



0123456789



Building a Foundation for Future Excellence

Growing up, Haben Girma knew that international exchange was bound to be in her future. She had visited Eritrea and Ethiopia, places her parents called home before immigrating to the United States. So when Haben learned about BuildOn (www.buildon.org) as a teenager, she was determined to go. She was excited about BuildOn's mission of empowering and educating youth by building schools in some of the world's poorest remote communities and knew first-hand the importance of access to education.

As a deaf-blind individual, Haben was raised in a culture of high expectations. Her parents and teachers worked with her to ensure that she learned braille and developed strong orientation and mobility (O&M) skills. Immersed in this mindset, Haben continuously sought new opportunities to challenge herself and build her independence.

When Haben shared her desire to participate in an upcoming BuildOn school build in Mali, her parents were initially nervous. With roots in Africa, Haben's parents were already all too familiar with the potential risks and were concerned for their daughter's safety. What if she got lost? Bitten by a snake or hurt in some way?

It Wasn't Just Her Parents Who Had Concerns

Haben explains, "I felt nervous! I did not really know how I would figure out how to do everything. How would I help build a school? How would I communicate with my team, with the locals?"

She worked directly with program staff to prepare for her participation in the project. Throughout her communication, Haben found that her initial concerns about disability access were dwindling away. She accessed programmatic materials in braille, worked with the staff to develop information sheets that would help her prepare for cultural and language differences, and openly shared her unresolved concerns so that they could be addressed.

"I talked to the program director and asked for her opinion. She said, 'I don't know either, but we'll find a way to make it work.' If challenges came up, I had people to help me resolve them."

Haben's experience also challenged her to think about her layers of identity. Haben shares, "The locals saw me as an American first and foremost, not as an Eritrean, not as a person with a disability, but as an American. Disability is stigmatized in Eritrea just like in most of the developing world, yet when I visited Mali I escaped a lot of that treatment because of my status as an American."

Coming home, Haben felt a new sense of optimism and confidence. The completion of a challenging project abroad helped her truly believe that her disability was not a barrier to future goals. These are skills she says are essential for other youth with disabilities to find success in college and post-college opportunities.





All my life, people told me my disability would not stop me from doing whatever I wanted to do. Successfully completing a trip abroad allowed me to really believe that.

Haben's parents felt more confident after her Mali trip, too. "Sending me to Mali was really scary for them, but afterwards they were very proud. My mom said that it helped her feel comfortable with the idea of me going to college out of state. She felt if I could do Mali, I could do anything."

Haben's volunteer abroad experience as a high school student was the beginning of many adventures to China, Costa Rica, Italy, and more. The trip abroad solidified her desire to work in disability rights and education law. Knowing that only 6% of deaf-blind children throughout the United States have access to qualified special education teachers, she has devoted her personal and professional pursuits to ensuring students with disabilities have equitable access to education.

Haben has since graduated with her undergraduate degree from Lewis & Clark College and a Juris Doctor degree from Harvard Law School. Nowadays, she serves as a Skadden Fellow at Disability Rights Advocates in Berkeley, California, where she works to improve education by advocating for students with disabilities to receive accessible instructional materials.

"It's now my approach to life. There are still things I don't know how I will accomplish, but I'm optimistic that I will figure it out, or others will be there to help me figure it out. Going on a trip abroad helps you develop optimism and self-confidence. Those are very important skills for college and life beyond college. I highly recommend that high school students try to do a volunteer experience abroad."

