

A World Awaits You

A Journal on People with Disabilities Traveling with a Purpose



People with Disabilities Experiencing the World



National Clearinghouse on Disability and Exchange

Engage with the World and Make Connections

You've earned a diploma – congratulations! If you're asking yourself "What's next?" it might be time to pick up a map. Even if you missed out on studying abroad, why not explore other international opportunities to immerse yourself in another culture and gain resume-building skills through: the arts, sports, volunteerism, internships, and professional experiences?

Participating in these kinds of overseas activities expose you to new places and interactions, help define your own values and interests, and allow you to give back while gaining experiences to set you on a path forward.

While alternative spring break and intern abroad programs are popular options for those still in school, these international opportunities can happen at any age.

As a mid-career professional or recent retiree, take time to broaden your interests and imagine taking it to the next level. Experiential exchanges open up cross-cultural collaboration that can lead to innovation in your field. You can also contribute to citizen diplomacy or transition into later life pursuits.

When encountering people in other cultures, be open to forming new connections that arise from shared identities or life experiences. People with disabilities who travel abroad can quickly find disability communities in other countries to tap into for friendship, support, or a possible volunteer or internship opportunity.

We need more of these interactions, so accessibility for people with disabilities is envisioned in new ways and inclusion becomes a reality in more places.

Some international travelers with disabilities choose to do an internship, cultural exchange, or volunteer program that is not necessarily focused on disability. They are participating in projects about the environment, for example.

Whatever type of experiential program you choose, you may find yourself indirectly changing perceptions if you have a visible or known disability and are the only exchange participant in the group or first visitor to the community to have one. You are showing what is possible, and educating others about disability in much the same way the local community is learning about you and your home culture.

In this issue of *A World Awaits You (AWAY)*, we encourage you to read stories from people with disabilities who brought arts integration curriculum to China or taught goalball in Russia. They volunteered and interned from Chile to Switzerland to Cameroon, and each is planning where they will go next.

The National Clearinghouse on Disability and Exchange staff and website can guide you on exploring and planning for similar journeys. Share your experiences and gain more abroad!

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www.miusa.org/ncde



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Infographic: Interconnected through Experiential Exchanges



INTERNATIONAL EXCHANGE

NAME

TIM MCCARTHY

FROM

USA

TO

CHINA

DURATION

1 MONTH



0123456789



Theatre Art Creates Common Ground

If you've ever traveled to another country without knowing the language, chances are you've entered into an impromptu game of charades with local people at some point, using colorful gestures to find your way back to the hostel or to seek out the best fruit stand.

Quest Visual Theatre takes the concept of using movement and visual interpretation to cross cultures one step – or make that several steps and a leap – further.

The majority of this company's theater performances include no spoken or signed language, which also levels out communication between Deaf and hearing actors and audiences. Tim McCarthy, who is hard of hearing, is the U.S. theater group's President and Artistic Director.

“Our work attracts people who are interested in challenging themselves, working in inclusive environments, and valuing difference and other cultures.”

Sponsored by the U.S. Department of State's Arts Envoy exchange program, Tim and other members of the company traveled to Hong Kong and mainland China for theater workshops and performances with the Arts for the Disabled Hong Kong (ADHK), and local schools for Deaf, hearing, and blind students. U.S. embassy and consulate staff planning the programs searched for local schools or non-governmental organizations that serve people with disabilities in order to reach these communities.

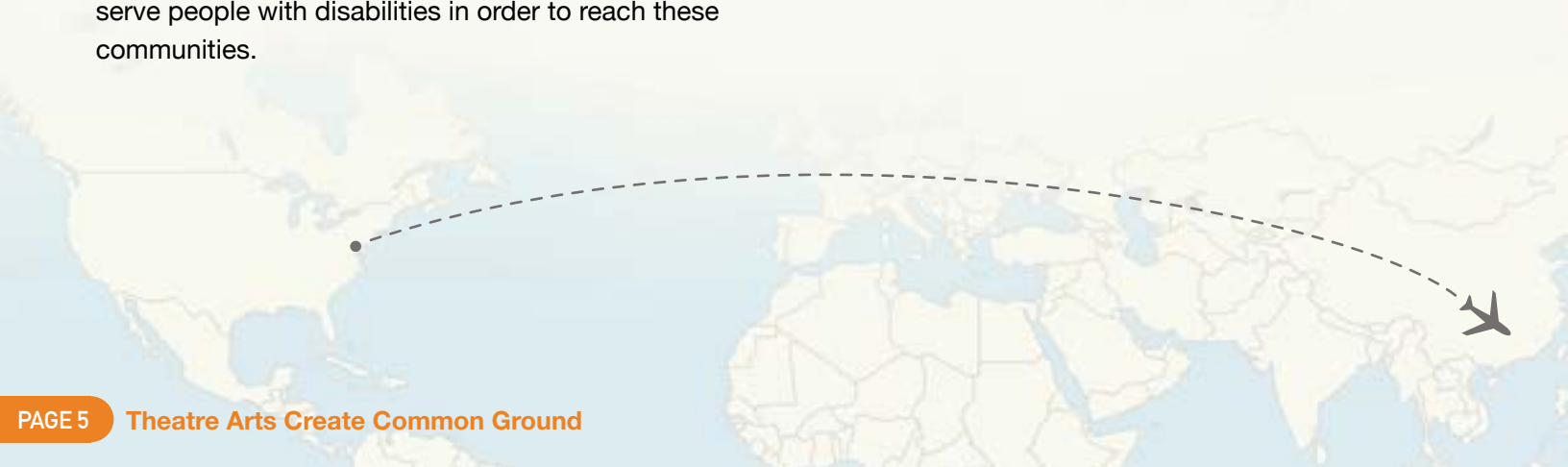
Through a month-long community engagement with the school for the Deaf and an afterschool program for hearing students, they performed *Liang and the Magic Paintbrush*, a traditional Chinese story. Alice, their other show based on *Alice in Wonderland*, sold out four performances. The audience often has no idea who is Deaf and who is hearing among the actors.

“One of the neat things about visual theater is that Deaf and hearing people, no matter what language they speak, can work together to create a piece. We talk a lot about creating common ground.”

To teach blind students the piece, the person who is interpreting in Mandarin Chinese describes the movement out loud while staff, assistants, and other participants facilitate the physical movements with blind participants.

With Deaf and hearing groups, the American Sign Language interpreters that travel with the group often hold dual positions; for example one interpreter may be a set designer while another is a workshop leader. They also offer trainings in sign language interpretation to help increase the number of Chinese sign language interpreters with professional level skills.

“There are a wide range of skill levels among interpreters in China. When we had top notch Hong Kong sign language interpreters, we were just flowing, moving, and there were no hang ups or gaps.”





Another purpose of the exchanges, which is a key role Tim plays, is to provide trainings on arts integration in the curriculum. Both the high quality of Quest Visual Theatre's work and the presence of professional artists and educators who are Deaf and hard of hearing, helps to spark discussions with government officials, educators, and artists in Hong Kong and mainland China about educational excellence and career opportunities for all.

"Ours is an open-ended exploratory approach to learning, which is very different than the Chinese approach. Our initial engagement can be a bit frustrating for our partners. There's a lot of skepticism and doubt. However, once we are there, there's a real transformation."

Quest Visual Theatre has also formed partnerships with groups in Austria, India, Mexico, Romania, and South Africa. Additionally, international actors have been part of this U.S.-based troupe through the years.

"Our experiences internationally definitely influence the work we do. Acting and dance styles are very different, so you have to borrow from one another. We are always paying attention to who is there and what they bring to the process."



Learn More About Cultural Diplomacy Programs

eca.state.gov/programs-initiatives/cultural-diplomacy



INTERNATIONAL EXCHANGE

NAME

ANTONIA DEMICHIEL

FROM

USA

TO

CHILE

DURATION

2 YEARS



0123456789



Building a Career Through Volunteer Abroad

With rain coming down hard outside and pooling from poor drainage systems under faint streetlights, Antonia DeMichiel starts her day. To stay warm she wears sweaters and wool socks, and catches a taxi to work. At day's end, her mind floods with the Chilean people she has met who may be sleeping on that cold night on mattresses in the street or sharing a room with several family members. She thinks how there is always more to do, and wonders what her role is in it all.

When Antonia graduated with an International Studies degree, she wanted to know if the lessons contained in all those textbooks would hold any weight in the real world. She decided to join Jesuit Volunteer Corps for two years in Santiago, Chile to find out.

“What’s really interesting for me is seeing different international development strategies applied in the local context. I’ve been working in lots of community-based development projects.”

In her first year abroad, Antonia coordinated a weekly program to integrate the growing population of immigrant and Chilean youth through play. During her second year, she took on multiple roles at a meal program for the homeless people in the Santiago neighborhood where Antonia and three other volunteers live.

“My low-income neighbors are helping people who are worse off than they are, so it’s very grassroots and very driven by this common desire my neighbors have to make a small dent in a social issue that is very present where we live.”

Antonia, who has cerebral palsy and uses forearm crutches, has neither encountered people with disabilities in her local community nor found many opportunities to discuss disability inclusion with Chileans. However, she feels her presence has helped her neighbors and Chilean friends see what people with disabilities can do and what it means to be integrated into a program where she is the only volunteer with a physical disability.

“I definitely have to work a lot harder here to surpass or break down people’s cultural assumptions. I feel like every day in big and small ways I’m pushing the limits of Chileans’ assumptions about people with disabilities.”

To prepare for these attitudinal barriers, Antonia sought out advice from well-traveled peers with disabilities and thought a lot about self-disclosure in the application process. In the end, she decided to disclose her disability in her essays and resume and to talk about her participation in two previous international volunteer opportunities in the context of her cerebral palsy.





“The process was really smooth, but it required a lot of self-advocacy on my part to very clearly state my needs, state the kind of accommodations I would need, and have a lot of dialogue with the Jesuit Volunteer Corps staff about how they could accommodate me, where they couldn’t accommodate me, and certain things I would just have to adapt to. Everything has been great.”

She admits the quick turnaround between being offered a volunteer placement and needing to accept it, without a lot of information about accessibility in the location, was “a huge leap of faith.” Santiago is the most urban site within the six countries in which Jesuit Volunteer Corps works abroad, which meant Antonia could expect better access to health care and public transportation; although the metro system doesn’t have access where she needs to go, the buses are accessible and have ramps. Jesuit Volunteer Corps increased Antonia’s transportation budget, so she can also take taxis around the city.

Antonia’s presence may pave the way for other volunteers with physical disabilities to navigate more easily thanks to improved accessibility. Jesuit Volunteer Corps paid to have the bathroom in the volunteers’ apartment remodeled to make it bigger and put in an accessible shower with grab bars. By installing railings and ramps in places in the parish and work sites, the community also became more accessible.

Antonia didn’t always have the same level of self-advocacy skills she has today, especially since she was in high school during prior volunteer abroad experiences to Mali, Nicaragua, and Uruguay. Youth with disabilities

are often blazing new trails when participating with international volunteer organizations, and at the time, she relied on her parents to know what she should be asking for, while the organizations just figured out accessibility as they went along.

“As I’ve gotten older and had more experiences, I’ve started to see that this doesn’t always work! The best thing for everyone to do is try to figure out the accommodations beforehand.”

Antonia may be just the right person for training international educators on what they need to know to prepare – she plans to get a graduate degree in International Education. And this time her real world experience will inform her education rather than the other way around.

“While these experiences have shaped my identity and character, I am aware that many students with disabilities do not know that volunteer programs can be made inclusive and accessible to them. I need to equip the next generation of students from this underrepresented population with resources to explore and contribute fully to our world.”



Read Antonia’s “Globe Trotting on Crutches” Blog
globetrottingoncrutches.blogspot.com

What's Your Volunteer Abroad Style?

It's your time – share it wisely! To make the most out of your service abroad, it's important to carefully examine your interests and skills, and your openness to partner with community members abroad who will have different perspectives.

Ask Yourself

Do you want to go on a program for a couple of weeks, a few months, or as long as two years?

Are you interested in being part of a group project or would you rather work individually with local community members?

What skills do you want to contribute? Some volunteer projects involve a lot of physical labor, such as trail maintenance, building construction, or archeological digs. Others require skills such as teaching, community organizing, or public health training.

Do you want to combine the experience with academic coursework and training?

What amount of direction or freedom do you want on the project? Some organizations provide volunteers with clear tasks to accomplish; others provide a general framework and leave it up to the volunteer to determine the specifics from listening to the community.

Are you interested in being in a bustling urban area, a rural village, or even in a wilderness area?

Do you want to use or improve your foreign language skills during the program, or do you want to use your native language?

Would you like to volunteer with your friends or family, including children?

How much money can you fundraise or afford? With a few exceptions, most volunteer-sending organizations charge a program fee and expect volunteers to cover their own travel and living expenses.

At this stage, focus on how you want to contribute, what you want to learn about communities abroad, and the type of program that fits your expectations – rather than on accessibility abroad and disability accommodations.

Once you identify potential opportunities that align with your goals, reach out to the staff at the sending or receiving organization for answers to your accessibility questions, from availability of orientation and mobility guides on-site to overseas health insurance coverage.

While it is not your role as a volunteer abroad to swoop in and save the day by helping others, neither should it be a situation where you are sidelined from participating because no one thought to plan for access. After all, interdependent partnerships rely on recognizing the contributions of everyone.





INTERNATIONAL EXCHANGE

NAME

ASYA MILLER

FROM

USA

TO

RUSSIA

DURATION

10 DAYS



0123456789



USA–Russian Connections On and Off the Court

As a blind Paralympic athlete and coach, Asya Miller is no stranger to international travel. And yet her journey to Russia as part of the U.S. Embassy Moscow and U.S. Department of State’s SportsUnited exchange program would be different. For the first time, Asya and other U.S. athletes were traveling, not to compete, but to educate. Rather than bringing home the gold, their mission was to teach coaches and athletes, and to introduce goalball to both sighted and blind students in Moscow.

“The sport of goalball brings a lot of people together, and you can find people who have other things in common with you, whether it is an eye condition or being competitive.”

Although Russia has a national goalball team, most of the schools that Asya and the other participants visited were new to the sport and were excited to have a goalball demonstration and to participate in skill building activities. In goalball, players wear eyeshades to block out sight or light, so they must listen for the bells inside the ball that sound when in motion. Much like soccer, the idea is to score in the other team’s goal. The ball is thrown at a goal at the opposing team’s end of the court while the defenders dive to block the ball with their bodies.

“We were trying to teach the kids how to play without being able to speak their language. We just needed the interpreter in the very beginning to tell them to follow us, and then I learned the words for left and right. I’d dive on the floor and all the kids would dive in the same direction. It was fun.”

Local logistics and interpreters were arranged through a partnership between the United States Association of Blind Athletes and two Russian non-governmental organizations, Perspektiva and PH International. Getting to Russia was easy for Asya and others in the SportsUnited group who are used to traveling internationally. While some participants traveled with a cane, Asya just packs a monocular in case she needs to read a sign far away, and she uses a magnifier application on her phone that allows her to take a photo and enlarge it.





“If it’s an airport I rarely travel to and I don’t have a lot time to find my way around, I will ask for assistance. If I can look at maps ahead of time and know where our hotel is in relation to other things, I can picture how to get around. I’m going to use landmarks instead of signs, like counting city blocks or knowing which way is north. Some of the streets are busier than others and are landmarks too.”

When they arrived at each school, the group would often be invited for tea with the administrators, and when they left, they gave each school a goalball and eyeshades so the students could continue to play.

“It’s a rewarding experience because they appreciate you coming there and sharing what you know with them. People were happy and having fun. Everything about it was positive.”



Learn About Sports Diplomacy Programs

eca.state.gov/programs-initiatives/sports-diplomacy



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.





Sit Beside Me, Go Forward Together

In Cameroon, Callie Frye noticed how Deaf and hearing people often sat side by side on the streets selling food, clothes, jewelry, and other items that they made. Whatever their skills were, and regardless of disability status, they had created individual businesses and lived off of them. This impressed her in much the same way that the locals came to understand the opportunities that Callie had in her life in the United States.

“How is a black person’s life in America?’ They asked me a lot of questions about that. I said my life is different than it is for white Americans, but I’m successful, I’m motivated, and I’m enthusiastic in how I’ve gone through my life.”

They were quite shocked to find out that she and other Deaf people can drive in America, and that Callie had flown to Africa alone as a woman without a male chaperone. Callie noticed again and again that male students in Cameroon tend to sit in the front while the female students sitting behind them receive less attention. She observed that the Deaf adults were the laborers and teaching assistants rather than the teachers at the schools for Deaf children.

Callie was in the country for ten weeks to intern with the Cameroon Deaf Empowerment Organization and volunteer with the private Kumba School for the Deaf.

“Not all the hearing teachers knew sign language, which is why they invited me to be part of their hiring committee to find more teachers proficient in sign language.”

She also worked to teach basic subjects to Deaf children in the summer program, spread awareness about the rights of people with disabilities on an international level, and train adults and teachers about HIV/AIDS prevention and health education.

“All of the students were kind of unaware about what was outside of Cameroon. For myself, I had early exposure to international subjects because my teachers and dorm supervisors at the Indiana School for the Deaf would talk about what the world looked like. I would think to myself ‘I want to travel.’”

As the first person in her family to explore beyond the United States, Callie whetted her appetite for travel with three months in Italy before starting her bachelor’s degree at Gallaudet University. In subsequent years, her travels continued, with trips to many other regions and for study abroad in France, as did her love of learning foreign languages.

“I’m learning Russian online. I don’t attend a class because the teacher is speaking Russian, so it is hard to find an interpreter who knows English, Russian, and American Sign Language. I decided, with teacher approval, I would follow through on the lessons and tests, but the auditory components are removed.”

Her initiative to make access work also benefits her when connecting with hearing and Deaf people from around the world. In Cameroon, Callie used a combination of American and French Sign Languages when communicating with the Deaf community, and she connected with hearing people through gestures or by typing in French on her cell phone or computer.

With a graduate degree from DePaul University in International Public Service, Callie aspires to work with international refugees overseas. She feels she will have much to offer to refugee communities based on her years bridging communication gaps.

“When I provide workshops or explain things in general, I am interactive, provide demonstrations, and add some humor to help hearing and Deaf refugees work through communication barriers.”

Callie has focused on and raised attention about inclusion in a variety of settings, from hospitals in Cameroon to the U.S. disability and relief organizations she interned with. Her success is partly founded on the simple discovery she made at that Cameroonian market: When people with and without disabilities work side by side, everyone is stronger.

Callie was selected for a Youth in International Development and Foreign Affairs internship for people with disabilities on return from Cameroon.



Learn How You Can Apply

uscd.org/index.cfm/youth-leadership-in-international-disability-rights

Making Inroads in Increased Participation

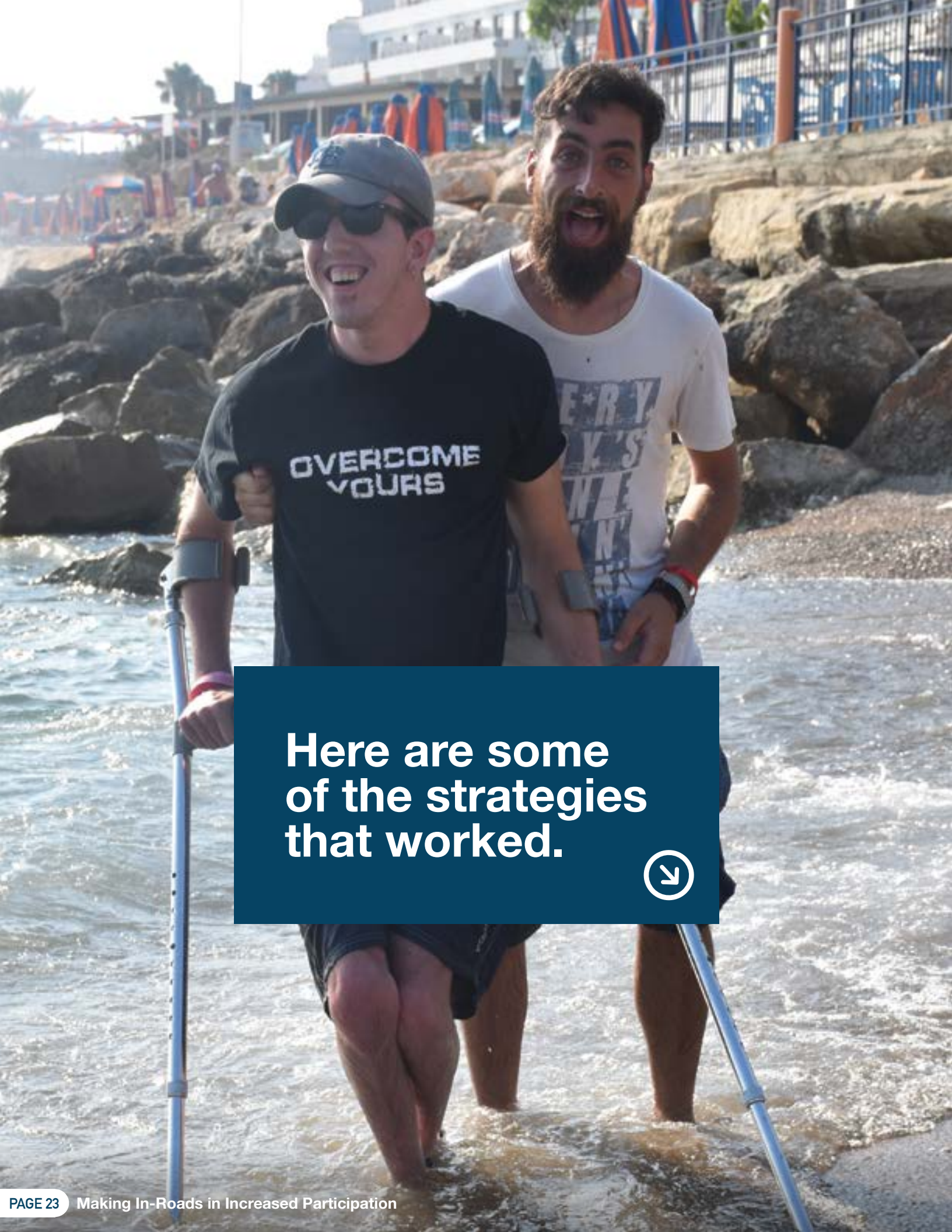
Legacy International has been administering U.S. Department of State-sponsored exchange programs for people from all different age groups for decades. They see more participants with disabilities on exchanges traveling to, rather than from, the United States. So, on the American Youth Leadership Program on environmental stewardship to Cyprus, Legacy International aimed for, and achieved, a U.S. delegation that included 40% of the participants with apparent or non-apparent disabilities. They also sought out first-time travelers and those who were the first in their families to have a passport.

According to Legacy International's Vice President, Mary Helmig, it was easy to encourage Americans with disabilities to participate if they made their efforts more deliberate. Mary used resources and advice from the National Clearinghouse on Disability and Exchange to build the staff's capacity to understand what disability-related accommodations are and to create dialogue with people during the application phase.



Learn About Youth Exchange Programs

eca.state.gov/programs-initiatives/youth-programs



**Here are some
of the strategies
that worked.**



Changing Practices

- Ensure that your website and program materials clearly outline types of disability-related accommodations provided on the international exchange program.

“We made that a lot more apparent for people, so they didn’t have to look for it really hard.”

- Make an organizational commitment to plan for participants with disabilities and train staff.

“As a result of our commitment to be more inclusive and the various accreditation processes we go through, some of which ask for disability accommodation plans, we built staff capacity throughout the organization.”

Planning Costs

- Allocate a percentage of the budget for disability-related accommodations, which is allowable in U.S. Department of State and many other exchange grant proposals.

“In the first year we had earmarked 8% of our budget for accommodations, which we didn’t even come close to spending. In the second year we scaled back to 5%.”

- Create clear communication about health insurance coverage and the reimbursement process for participants with pre-existing conditions.

“We have to be very upfront with families that their health insurance is the primary insurance for pre-existing conditions and they have to check whether it can be used overseas or buy their own traveler’s insurance.”

Collaborating with Others

- Reach out to disability groups and schools on a regular basis and highlight stories from participants with disabilities on your website.

“Many parents of teenagers with disabilities are concerned about their children being bullied and not accepted. They really have to build trust with us as an organization and that takes a little bit of time.”

- Ask a medical or disability professional to review each participant’s information forms that you collect to advise you on whether more information is needed to assess the actual day-to-day effects of a participant’s disability.

“People are not always forthcoming about their needs. I wish people felt safer through the process, and saw information sharing and educating others as a key part of preparation.”

Shaping the Group

- Create opportunities in orientation for team building and to share experiences that help foster group dynamics.

“The youth share experiences like what makes it easy for them to feel accepted, what makes it hard to talk in the group, so everybody gets to gauge on how best to be with one another.”

- Invite trip leaders with disabilities or who have professional disability experience who can mentor program staff and participants.

“We had one adult participant with cerebral palsy who was really flexible and helped test out accessibility abroad. I learned a lot about adaptive technologies from another trip leader who was a teacher.”



 INTERNATIONAL EXCHANGE

 NAME

LINEA JOHNSON

 FROM

USA

 TO

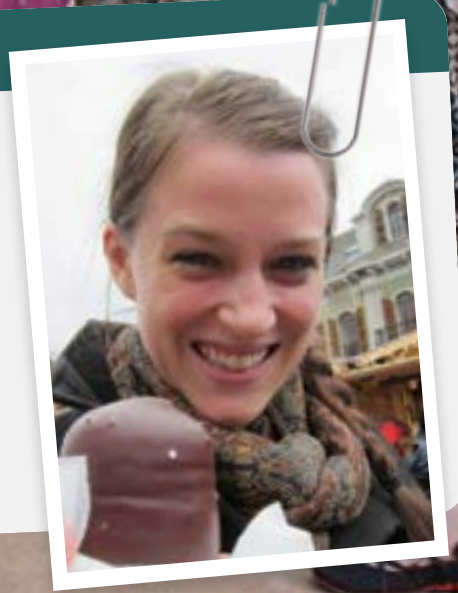
INDIA & SWITZERLAND

 DURATION

1 WEEK / 3 MONTHS



0123456789



Real World Experiences in Mental Health

Linea Johnson knows what it is to live with mental health conditions, but it wasn't until she sought out volunteer and internship opportunities abroad that she discovered how varied life with a mental health condition can be in other parts of the world.

Most recently, she spent a week in Kerala, India, observing a local community mental health team, which was coordinated through Linea's mental health advocacy mentor.

“I had never been to a developing nation before, and I went in with my American mindset that perhaps there was something that I could teach them. Perhaps there was, but I learned so much from them.”

She noticed how members of the mental health team were creating wraparound services, in which community members support one another and lessen the stigma about people with mental health disabilities. Since there are so few psychiatrists and trained mental health workers in India, non-profits are training lay people to assess their peers' mental health and, through weekly check-ins, their general well-being: Is their roof leaking? Are they getting along with their family? Do they have a job?

“It was beautiful to see and a little disheartening that we aren't doing that more in the United States – we just rely on medication, and we don't have anyone checking in regularly to see that they are doing okay. In every presentation I give, I talk about it now; I try to spread the message as much as possible.”

Linea creates her own support system when preparing for independent travel. She requests a prescription and a note stating the need for her medications from her psychiatrist to bring with her medications, arranges for sleeping pills and a regulated medication schedule on her flights, packs snacks or makes other adjustments to get easier access to meals, and takes a malaria medication that does not include nightmares as a possible side effect. These strategies keep triggers and episodes related to her bipolar and eating disorders at bay.





Linea is aware that traveling to developed countries creates stressors, too. An internship in Switzerland with the World Health Organization (WHO) included long days jam-packed with hard work, intern activities and trainings, not to mention late nights getting to know the constantly revolving door of interns from all over the world.

“It was an exhausting schedule. I was trying to keep up with everyone until I realized I couldn’t always be out with them. I had to take some nights off and come home early. When I actually found a counselor at WHO that I could see every week, that really helped.”

Linea’s internship supervisor was very supportive when she disclosed her mental health conditions. Linea was able to see the counselor during the day, a service which was free to employees and extended as a benefit to her as an intern. Also, since WHO has a nap room, she could lay down when her medication made her feel sick in the morning and then go back to work when she was feeling better.

During her three-month unpaid internship, Linea worked on database country reports on mental health and the health care system in different countries. She sorted through data on how politics, terrain, and other factors affected the mental health system. In the end, she got to observe in Greece a WHO training program for individuals, family members, clinicians, and physicians to assess human rights violations using the WHO quality checklist.

“It helped me hugely to find a job. I wanted to move into working in health care and I only had a degree, so when I put WHO on my resume it seemed I could get into any health care job I wanted.”

Since then, Linea has worked in the health care field while also completing an Executive Master’s of Healthcare Leadership at Brown University, and has her sights set on working overseas in global public health. For that, her experiences abroad have helped her be better positioned for success in collaborating to make communities stronger, healthier, and connected.





How to Fund an Experience of a Lifetime



Most experiential programs abroad involve some expenses related to travel, lodging, meals, health insurance and more.

You're probably thinking, "Wait, I have to pay to volunteer or work abroad?" It may seem counterintuitive, but keep in mind that there are significant costs for programs to send, train, and support participants abroad. Typically, U.S. sending organizations, participants, and host country partners work together to share these costs.

Unfortunately, scholarships or stipends for volunteer, intern, or cultural experiences abroad are harder to come by than scholarships for study abroad. The good news is that compared to many traditional study abroad programs, experiential program fees are typically lower, and your fundraising efforts can help meet costs.

Some associations, foundations, and religious or government sponsored programs offer stipends to cover living expenses and travel and health insurance for people interested in longer-term assignments, such as the Peace Corps or Fulbright Program, or provide paid fellowships to youth or those in the arts, sports, education, or with specialized technical skills.

People working for multi-national companies might also find workplace programs that support their time away from the office to volunteer their skills in communities where their corporate offices are located worldwide.

Finally, if program fees are simply too high for your budget, look into designing your own experience abroad. This puts you in control of how much to spend on housing, transportation, meals, and other costs. If you go this route, identify local partners to help you make in-country arrangements and navigate the new culture.

Teresa Pichardo received a Harris Wofford Global Service Fellowship from Cross-Cultural Solutions to volunteer at a Deaf school in Ghana.



Learn More About Volunteer Abroad Organizations That Offer This Fellowship

buildingbridgescoalition.org/about-us/wofford-fellowship/



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.


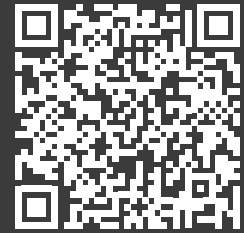


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exchanges.state.gov/non-us/program/empower-program

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A circular inset image showing two young women sitting at a wooden table, smiling and looking towards the camera. The woman on the left is wearing a red top, and the woman on the right is wearing a dark top.

**Explore
the World.
Create
Access.**

A circular inset image showing two women walking outdoors. The woman on the left is wearing a pink top and a patterned skirt, and the woman on the right is wearing a dark t-shirt and shorts, using a white cane.

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Perform.**

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Fast Facts

22,181 postsecondary U.S. students participated in non-credit work, internships, and volunteering abroad in 2013/14. If equally represented, that would mean 2,000 U.S. students with disabilities did the same.

(2015 Open Doors Report on International Educational Exchange)

22,181

2K

Would you WIVA?

W

Work

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V

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A

Abroad





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