



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