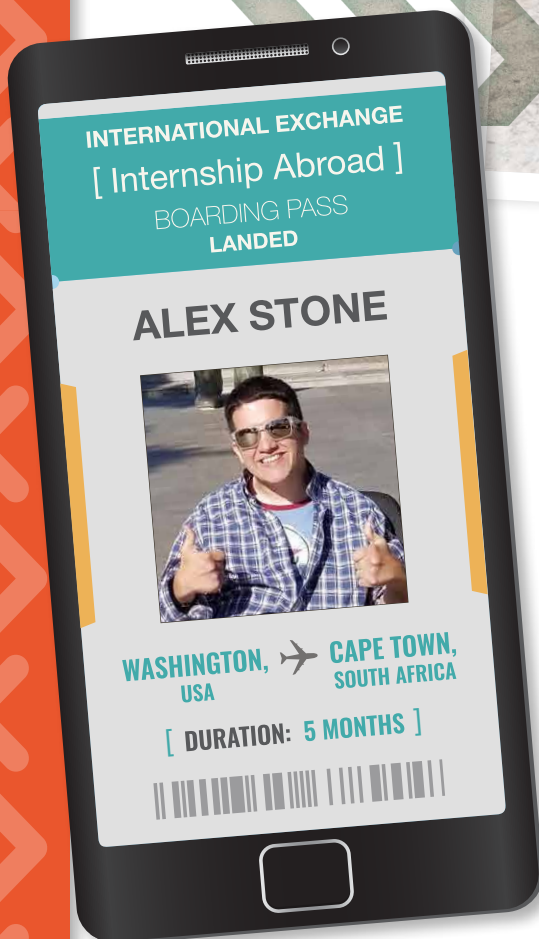
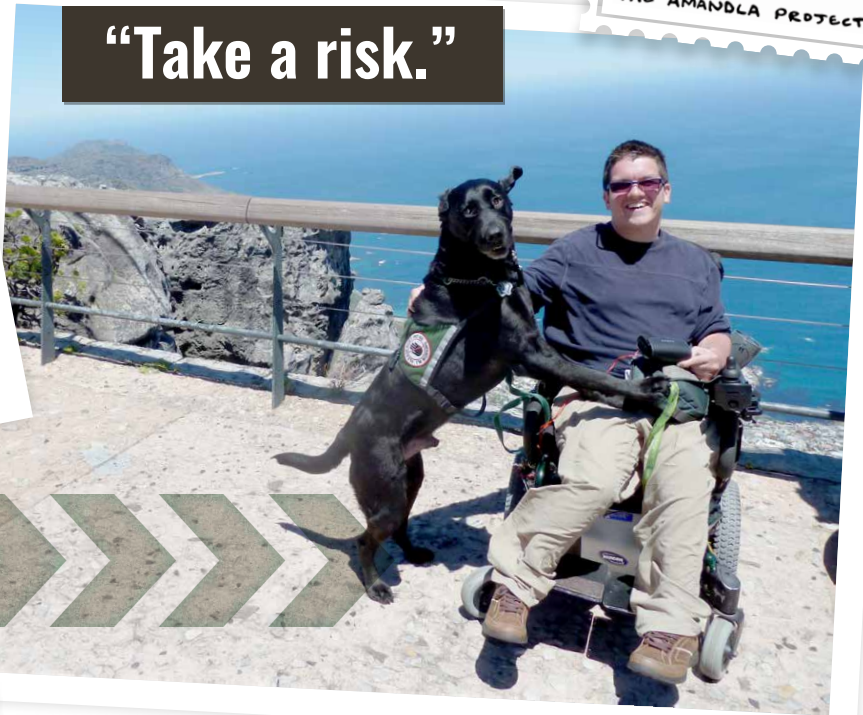


Alex Stone — Cultivating “Amandla” for a Global Impact

By Monica Malhotra



“Take a risk.”



As Alex stood on the stage of a dimly-lit comedy club, he smiled even wider as the laughs and cheers grew stronger. Alex never thought he would be performing stand-up comedy, and this was just one way that participating in an internship with a disability advocacy organization in South Africa altered his life and the path he chose to pursue.

Alex has cerebral palsy and has ridden a power wheelchair since he was two years old. “I was obviously disabled to everyone that saw me ever since I was very young, but I always ran away from that identity. I did not want to be labeled.”

As a student at Seattle University, Alex pursued his Bachelor's in Public Affairs with an international track. He hadn't traveled much internationally, but he cultivated a passion to understand more about the world around him, especially Sub-Saharan African countries. So he was excited that his program had an international internship component, and he signed up for South Africa.

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He was initially disappointed that he was placed with a disability organization but set up a Skype interview with the organization to understand more about their work before he decided to accept the position.

Alex learned that it was a pivotal time for people with disabilities in Africa. His internship host organization, now known as the African Disability Alliance, was mandated by the African Union to support South Africa and other African nations to become more accessible. Alex was thrilled to hear about the role he could play with the organization and the widespread impact it could make.

Over the course of his 5-month internship, Alex worked on fundraising and several advocacy projects. This entailed reaching out to disability advocates from all across Africa, including Zimbabwe, Kenya, Swaziland, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Beyond the projects he was supporting through the African Disability Alliance directly, he was pleasantly surprised to see the ripples he was making in the community around him, disabled and nondisabled.

“Being in South Africa opened my eyes to conditions that I wasn’t used to on the ground in terms of accessibility.”

Alex arrived in South Africa with his service dog, Fraser. He realized that the only service dogs people in South Africa were used to seeing were guide dogs for blind people.

Passers-by often stopped to marvel at the duo and wondered why a man who could see would have a service dog. Many asked questions about the support a dog could offer to a person who rides a power wheelchair. Alex appreciated the questions and the opportunity to educate the community. He explained how Fraser had the ability to identify his luggage at the airport, and Alex also found himself

frequently demonstrating in the streets how Fraser would help him navigate the street and retrieve his items.

Alex always thought it was normal for all students to study abroad, but he later read statistics indicating that students with disabilities do not go abroad at the same rate as their nondisabled peers. It was then that the script was flipped for Alex. He reflected on the great experience he had and the characteristics it fostered for him.

It gave him more confidence and he didn’t have the inhibitions he had before with public speaking. He started sharing his story of his internship and traveling with Fraser, which led to his job with Summit Assistance Dogs. He performed stand-up comedy in South Africa and back home several times. He gained the ability to utilize the resources within himself and his network to get things done, even though it sometimes looked different than what he originally planned. He learned to “roll with the punches” and not focus on the small things too much when planning.

Wanting to use his experience to reduce the disparity of students with disabilities going abroad, Alex soon launched the Amandla Project to offer fellowships to students with disabilities from all across the world to participate in an 8-week internship in South Africa to gain leadership and advocacy skills. “Amandla” translates to “Empowerment” in Zulu and Xhosa.

Alex realized that making one decision to go to South Africa and leaving the familiar behind shaped his personal and professional trajectory. He now wants to encourage more students with disabilities to take that step as well.

“Take a risk! You cannot even begin to conceptualize the awesome things that are going to happen to you before you embark on that journey!”