

# Justice Shorter — Experiential Learning at the Nexus of Theory and Practice

By Ashley Holben



**“Adapt!**

**That was my mantra.”**



“There’s an undeniable vibe that moves through the air,” Justice Shorter ascribes to her temporary home in northern Uganda and Rwanda. “My study abroad experience gave me the chance to encounter that time and time again.”

As a graduate student at SIT Graduate Institute, Justice chose to study on SIT’s Peace & Post Conflict Reconciliation summer program in Uganda and Rwanda to observe how inclusive development can be used to alleviate the effects of poverty while working towards her Master’s in Sustainable Development.

The program promised to provide an on-the-ground understanding of measures that have been taken toward conflict mitigation, resettlement, and prevention in the region. Justice was highly attracted to this experiential learning model that characterizes SIT’s study abroad

# Justice's advice for travelers with disabilities

## 1 Don't assume that Africa is inaccessible.

"I don't want to sugar-coat it: access can be challenging. Still, people need to get away from the idea that they won't be able to find what they need." There's also a misconception that Africa is uniform, when in fact it is a mosaic of amazing metropolitan cities as well as vibrant rural communities that have distinct approaches to access and inclusion.

## 2 The difference between a crisis and a problem is time.

To ensure that the program would work for her, Justice let the staff know in advance that she'd need materials in digital formats, electronic information in advance, and time to orient herself to new spaces and places.

## 3 Know that you are not alone.

Contact disability organizations in the area you are interested in exploring to find out what resources are available and what sorts of laws and social norms affect people with disabilities.

## 4 Learn from the experiences of local people with disabilities.

On a previous experience abroad, Justice valued the opportunity to talk to blind people in Cape Town, South Africa. Remember their experiences will not necessarily mirror your own. "You're coming from a different part of the world. They can teach you, and you can teach them. It's another aspect of cultural exchange."

## 5 People can help make or break an experience for you.

You don't always get to choose your travel companions, but your group can acknowledge that each person needs assistance at times and that each person also has strengths to offer. You're all learning together. "Fortunately, I was surrounded by really wonderful people."

## 6 Do not let anything stop you from going out and experiencing the world.

"We have a phenomenal planet with phenomenal people and places on it."



programs. "They really put you in the environment to learn hands-on. You're not just reading something in a research paper or watching a video. You're having real-world interactions, speaking to people with lived experiences."

For her program, this involved living with a host family and practicing local languages including Acholi and Kinyarwanda, but it also meant appreciating the depth of the region's hardships. Justice and her peers met with organizations and individuals devoted to helping communities recover from the conflict driven by Joseph Kony and the Lord's Resistance Army in northern Uganda, and they joined challenging discussions with people who survived an era of genocide against Tutsis in Rwanda. During visits to genocide museums, Justice, who is legally blind, asked her fellow students to describe visuals out loud to her, acknowledging that to articulate scenes of atrocity verbally can be even more wrenching than quiet observation. "It's very emotional, heavy, hard.

But you realize that if you feel this way, you can only imagine how the survivors must feel. In leading these tours, presentations, and discussions for people who want to learn, they live it daily."

In the wake of extreme anguish, Justice was inspired by the resilience of the survivors to take ownership of their history and live joyfully. Everywhere she went, she found people who were proud and passionate about their personal and family histories, their relationships, their food, their languages, their music, their dance—and, oh, did they dance!

"Towards the end of the program, we had a big celebration with all of our homestay families in Gulu, a city in the Northern Region of Uganda. We were all dancing and sweating, showing each other our best moves. I danced with the kids and tried to keep up with my homestay sister as she showed me new dances. It was an unforgettable night!"





“Adaptation equals survival” seemed to embody the spirit of her local hosts—one that she held in her own heart as she traveled. “Adapt! That was my mantra.” If things didn’t go according to plan—whether it was a power outage, someone running late, or inaccessible reading materials—Justice resolved to find ways to still get the most out of the experience. The program staff always seemed to have contingency plans in place. “Whatever happens, the whole day shall not be wasted! That has stayed with me since then.”

Justice estimates that her fellow travelers and the local people she met had had very few, if any, personal experiences with someone with a disability, and that as a result, her daily interactions with people helped to spark conversations around blindness, accessibility, and inclusion. Still, she was mindful of not trying to represent all blind or disabled people and instead allowed herself to be her own multi-dimensional self.

“Yes, I am someone who is blind, but I’m also someone who is black, a woman, a lesbian. All of these aspects are as much a part of my identity, and I am proud of them, but none of them individually solely represent me.”

“Yes, I am someone who is blind, but I’m also someone who is black, a woman, a lesbian. All of these aspects are as much a part of my identity, and I am proud of them, but none of them individually solely represent me. If you can find ways to be who you are, even when it’s difficult or not accessible, people will remember you as a whole person.”

But “who you are” is also susceptible to stretch, flex, and grow under the catalyst of international exchange. It’s a phenomenon which Justice urges travelers to embrace with open arms.

“When you study abroad, you don’t walk away the same person you were when you walked in. You can’t go across the world without gaining a new sense of appreciation for

it—even if it’s that you didn’t know what you thought you knew before. Immerse yourself as much as you possibly can.”