

# DIRECTING ACCESS IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC

Students from NOVA flew to Prague, then traveled south to the town of Pisek, where we were mentored by acclaimed Czech filmmakers at the Film Academy of Miroslav Ondricek and engaged with Czech students to produce short films.

Shea Megale spent four weeks over the summer of 2018 directing an original film that she had created with a group of Czech actors during an exchange with Northern Virginia Community College (NOVA)

In the summer of 2018, Shea Megale, a woman with spinal muscular atrophy type II who uses a power chair, participated in the first-ever Czech Republic filmmaking program organized by Northern Virginia Community College (NOVA).

Community college had represented an amazing opportunity for Shea to both grow as a person and to find a community of friends her age. She took two years of film classes, and collaborated on film projects with fellow students. All the while she was aware of a potential opportunity to participate in a filming exchange in the Czech Republic, as talk around the academic department of inaugurating such a program went back to her first semester at NOVA.

A panel of professors met to decide which of ten original film scripts from the NOVA students would be converted into movies during the student's time in the Czech Republic. Shea's script was one of those chosen, with Shea as the director.

The town of Pisek was the perfect place for a short film project, offering opportunities for a historical old world backdrop that would never be found in the United States. With its classic architecture and cobblestone streets, it was the perfect place for Shea's script which was based in 1908.

Directing her own film script, Shea practiced leadership and interpersonal skills as she worked



That feeling of belonging was sacred to me. So the idea of going to Europe to experience challenge, adventure, and discovery with people I loved was a life experience I lunged for.

with a diverse cast of American and Czech students and actors. Since they could not speak each other's language, she communicated with her movie cast partially with the help of interpreters. Her years of practicing different kinds of nonverbal communication also proved useful as she surmounted language barriers to achieve the perfect scenes, such as one in which a character is unexpectedly hit in the face by a flying fish.

"So for one take, I, without speaking through a translator, leapt in front of the actor and used two fingers to say, Keep your eyes right here on me, and smiled. He made eye contact with me as we rolled and the fish came and--perfect--he did not flinch. When we finally got the take, he smiled too. No words needed."

Shea was able to pay for the program and most of the cost of her personal attendant services using the money that she had earned as a teaching assistant for lower-level film classes taught by her favorite professor.

Shea also would require a personal attendant to help get in and out of bed. Shea and her parents did a lot of work to make sure to find the right person. Host staff in the Czech Republic helped find someone by publishing the request in local newspapers.

Shea and her parents ultimately settled on a personal attendant, who was a middle-aged woman that worked for a local eldercare home. Since the personal attendant already had a day job, she had experience, and more than that, she was genuinely interested in learning about Shea and supporting her with her needs.

The personal attendant supported Shea during the mornings and the evenings with her bedtime



and wake up routines. Since neither spoke the other's language, they communicated using a mix of Google translate and nonverbal gestures.

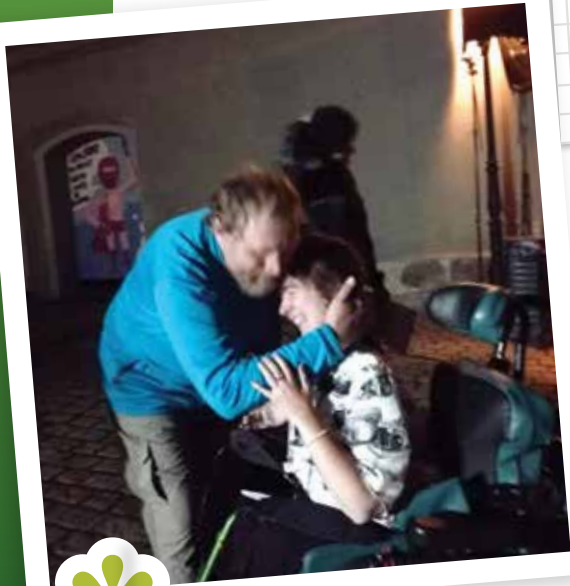
Nevertheless there were times when Shea's personal attendant was not available due to her other work obligations. For instance, Shea's personal attendant had to be off to work by six in the morning. At the same time, Shea would sometimes be up until four in the morning filming, and she would come back home more ready to go to bed than to wake up. Fortunately, all it took was a simple group text and she could reliably count on her classmates to assist. In one impactful instance, four male students responded to one of these group texts to transfer Shea from her bed to her chair.

Shea feels fortunate to have been able to access such a special opportunity. As a young, effervescent wheelchair-user passionate about the writing and filming worlds, she needed a college that was moving as fast as she was, and she found that in NOVA. Where else would she have been able to write and direct her own film, leading a cast of 20 Czech students, only in the nimble, supportive environment of the community college?

Shea plans to graduate with her BA in History with a minor in Astronomy from the University of Virginia. She has also published through St. Martin's Press her first Young Adult novel about a wheelchair-using film student who falls in love with her lead actor. The book is titled "This is Not a Love Scene."

# QUICK TIPS

for Personal Assistant Services Abroad



## □ GET FUNDING

There are a variety of methods to cover the costs of a personal assistant. Disabled travelers may save up money through work-study. A community fundraiser using an online tool like GoFundMe can also be a good way to find funding. Showing that the international exchange is part of an Individualized Employment Plan (IEP), an exchange participant might get funding from The Department of Vocational Rehabilitation for a personal assistant. For any sponsored programs or scholarships, check if funding for a personal assistant can be provided. Many colleges will likely not provide funding, but scholarship programs have supported cost for personal assistant services in the past, so it's worth checking on!

## □ BEGIN THE SEARCH

Enlist support from staff in the host country who can publish an ad in the local newspaper or ask around their networks for personal assistant services. Consider if a friend or classmate would be willing to come along as a personal assistant (PA).

Check disability services/organizations, independent living centers, for staff looking for chances to work and assist an enthusiastic student with a disability.

## □ FIGURE OUT COMMUNICATION

Learn a few key terms in the local language to provide guidance to locals on lifting, guiding, reaching or other support that the individual with a disability might need. Google translate can bridge the gap where language skills fall short.

## □ IDENTIFY BACKUPS

Sometimes the person with a disability and the personal assistant's schedules will not be the same, and at other times they may need a break from one another. Check to see if a local care home has other staff on hand that could serve as backups. Don't underestimate the ability of peers to step in if needed.

