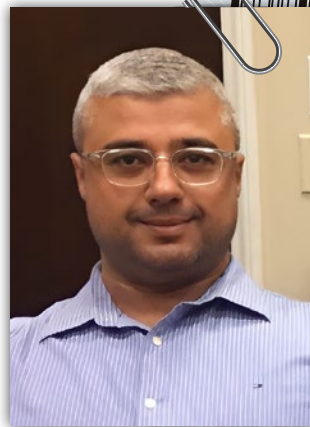


A Mission Guided by the International Visitor Leadership Program (IVLP)



FADI EL HALABI

FROM:
Lebanon

TO:
United States

EXCHANGE TYPE:
Arts & Professional Exchange

BOARDING PASS

Fadi El Halabi, a dancer, wheelchair user, and disability rights activist from Lebanon expanded his civic engagement and advocacy work as a result of his U.S. Department of State's International Visitor Leadership Program (IVLP).

Launched in 1940, the IVLP is a two-day to three-week professional exchange program for recent and emerging foreign leaders. IVLP advances U.S. foreign policy objectives by providing firsthand knowledge about U.S. society, culture, and politics to participants as they cultivate professional relationships. The IVLP also creates opportunities for business, professional, and academic collaboration. Every project includes home hospitality and cultural activities.

Fadi became disabled at the age of 18 months when meningitis damaged his spinal cord and he began using a wheelchair. After pursuing his career and building a strong network, Fadi began championing disability rights.

Since his adolescence when his country was emerging from Civil War, Fadi expressed an interest in civic activism. "When I saw many people engaged in different causes in our society, I was attracted to this. I felt that I needed to be a part of this movement." Fadi got involved with his church and worked to increase access for individuals with disabilities to practice with their faith community. He also worked with a group to advance a nonviolent mindset in society and to fight sectarianism.

Fadi has always believed that he could accomplish whatever he put his mind to. He wanted to become a psychologist. "In 2003, he earned his master's degree in clinical

psychology with an emphasis in couples counseling. Around 2007, he heard of the opening of a new television station looking for a host – a dream job according to Fadi. Using connections with the station managers, he arranged a meeting that facilitated the realization of his dream. From 2007 to 2011 Fadi hosted a talk show called Tawasol, which means communication and connection in Arabic. He also aspired to become a great wheelchair salsa dancer. In 2015, he and his nondisabled partner won the World Latin Dance Cup in Miami.

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In 2006, Fadi took a profound interest in disability issues when invited to participate in the conference of the World Council of Churches (WCC). At that time, he was almost 30 years old. Organizers asked him to create and head a Middle East affiliate of the Ecumenical Disability Advocates Network (EDAN), a -based disability organization that advocates for the rights and dignity of people with disabilities around the world. His focus area would include Lebanon, Jordan, and other surrounding countries. Disability awareness in the Middle East was limited. Few universities took steps to provide reasonable accommodations and injustice against people with disabilities occurred at many levels. Through his activism, Fadi sought to empower others to act on these issues.

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The United States Embassy Public Affairs Section (PAS) in Beirut recognized his efforts and invited him to participate in an IVLP in 2011. However, his talk show duties prevented him from accepting the invitation until the second email invitation from PAS in 2017.

"I received an invitation by email with an application which I submitted, and then I was chosen to participate in the program."

That year, he traveled to the United States for his three-week IVLP along with a group of three other Lebanese leaders. They visited Washington, DC, Chicago Illinois, Portland and Eugene, Oregon (the home city of the Mobility International USA (MIUSA) office).

They met numerous professionals focused on the advancement of people with disabilities in the United States. Organizations they visited included various centers for independent living, the National Federation of the Blind, university disability resource centers and MIUSA.

Fadi was particularly fascinated by the work of The Office of Civic and Community Life, a bureau of the City of Portland founded in 1974 as a way for members of the Portland community to get involved with their local government. There he met Oregon disability program coordinator Joanna Johnson, whom the Bureau had hired for the purpose of consulting on how they could improve accessibility to Portlanders with disabilities.

"In Lebanon we have the municipality, but inclusion is not very well recognized and valued. So I wanted to see how they were in the city of Portland and to collaborate."





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Another high point included traveling to the University of Illinois to discuss services for students with disabilities. The disability resource center's assistive technology program and its director, Patricia Barrett Malik particularly impressed Fadi. The group also attended cultural events and experienced dinner hospitality in the homes of Americans.

Inspired by his IVLP experience and the resources that he learned about in the United States, Fadi established a center in Antonine University upon his return to Lebanon. He called it the Relational Ecology Center (REC). The center offers counseling and an inclusive space for students with disabilities. It also promotes mental health for the whole university, and it works to promote community service.

The center primarily advocates for access. For example, the university was going to construct a new building for its engineering department. His office did an access audit of the building,



and through a collaborative process with the university they made that building the first fully accessible space on the campus.

Working through Ecumenical Disability Advocates Network (EDAN), he also organized an extremely well received online conference focused on rights to relationships and family for people with disabilities in Jordan. They initiated a project called Rights for Home and Families for people with disabilities. The project was based on Article 23 of the United Nations Convention which says that states should take steps to guarantee the rights of people with disabilities in marriage, family, parenthood and relationships. They partnered with Hashemite University in Jordan and the Higher Council for Affairs of Persons with Disabilities of Jordan and I Am Human NGO. The goal was to raise awareness and respect for the rights of people with disabilities to marry and have families, which up to that point had been a taboo subject in Jordan.

In 2020, the State Department's Office of International Visitors (OIV) again recognized Fadi's accomplishments and invited him for a virtual IVLP Gold Star project in conjunction with the 30th anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).

The Gold Star IVLP recognizes outstanding alumni who return home and use their IVLP experience to impact their communities. Fadi virtually returned to communities in the Global Ties Network in Portland, Eugene, and Chicago. He reinvigorated relationships with professionals at MIUSA, the City of Portland, and Access Living Chicago. He forged new connections with AXIS dance company founders and planned numerous follow up conversations to further his disability rights action plan.

Despite the ongoing challenges in Lebanon, Fadi continues to be a force positive for disability rights. His tireless advocacy efforts have benefitted so many and inspired others to take civic action to improve the lives of people with disabilities. ■