

# A World Awaits You

A Publication of the National Clearinghouse on Disability and Exchange



## Experiential Exchanges

- People with Disabilities
- Expand the Definition of
- International Exchange

Connect  
Discover  
Influence

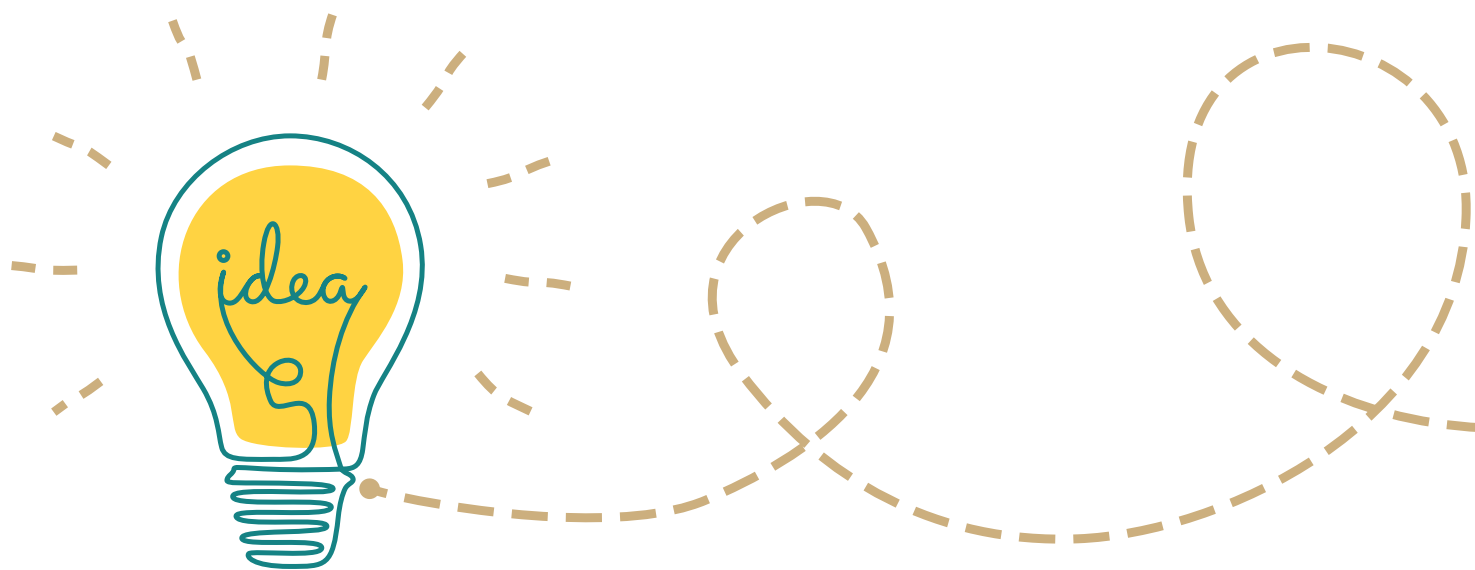


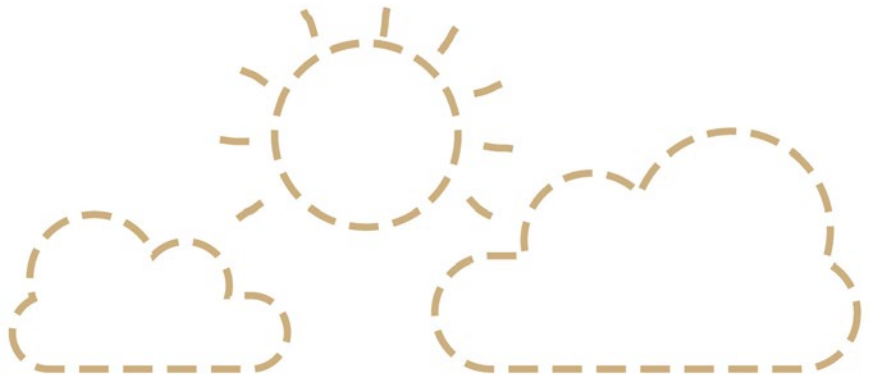
# Experiencing the World through Open-Mindedness and Creativity

**From the Editor: Justin Harford** — — — — —

*To open this latest release of the AWAY Journal, NCDE program coordinator Justin Harford reflects on an experience that he had when he visited a couple of blind friends in 2015 in Mexico. Justin, who is blind, originally met these friends when he studied abroad in their country in 2008.*

One of my most memorable international experiences was in 2015, when I went with a couple of my friends from Mexico to visit a diamond mine in the city of Guanajuato. It was not so much the experience of walking down a mine, with what felt like almost 20 flights of extremely steep, jagged and uneven asphalt stairs, clinging to a rope for balance, with my low vision friend Rosie giving my totally blind friend Omar clues about where to put his feet. It was memorable because before we started on the long trek downward, our tour guide suggested that three blind people might not be safe in a diamond mine, but our assurance that we would be safe was enough for him to be willing to guide us. No second guessing, no refusal to work with us, and no justifying it based on false assertions that it was for our own safety. Once at the bottom, our guide turned off the lights in order to simulate for us the absolute darkness under which miners in the 16th century would have worked as they extracted the mine's bounty. The irony was not lost on me.





## Start with yes.

Everyone should approach situations involving people with disabilities like that tour guide, and start with "yes." Exchange professionals can start with "yes" by considering each situation independently, and not rushing to conclusions based on stereotypes. Individuals with disabilities can start with "yes" by focusing on what you want to do rather than what you or others think you can do and by doing your own research and not simply accepting what a program tells you as the final word.

This publication includes something for professionals and individuals alike. Through the tips sheet and best practices shared, professionals will learn about the ways that their colleagues have supported people with disabilities on experiential exchange programs. The stories will provide individuals with disabilities and professionals alike with an idea of what volunteering or interning abroad with a disability can look like.



## In this Issue.

You will have the opportunity to read about individuals with disabilities who have volunteered, interned and more overseas. A young blind person volunteered in San Francisco before carrying out her own community service project in her hometown of Armenia, Colombia. A Deaf woman from the United States went to the Dominican Republic, the birthplace of her late father, to survey life of Deaf and hard of hearing people. A man with a limb difference, who taught himself to play guitar, has been spreading his message of encouragement and hope on the U.S. Department Of State-funded American Music Abroad Program. A wheelchair basketball player and two-time paralympian has found a group of like-minded promoters of sport through the Global Sports Mentoring Program, which will enable him to lift up more young athletes in his Township of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa.

In a two instances, we feature individuals who some may have assumed to be unsafe overseas. After advocating for herself, a blind service scholar at Mercer University was able to go to South Africa to advise business owners. Another retired educator served in the Peace Corps Response while managing a lower back condition, which might have, but didn't, create an issue for her.

The common thread in these stories is that through open-mindedness and creativity, individuals with all kinds of disabilities can meaningfully and safely experience the world. ■

# Table of Contents

---

- 05** **Johna Wright**  
Impact Where it is Least Expected:  
A Watershed Moment in South Africa
- 08** **Tony Memmel**  
Playing Along on the American Music Abroad Program
- 10** **Judy Jones**  
Continuing a Life of Service in Peace Corps Response
- 12** **Tips for International Exchange Providers on Supporting  
People with Disabilities in Experiential Programs**
- 14** **Siphamandla "Sips" Gumbi**  
Finding Confidence Through Wheelchair Basketball
- 18** **Sara Giraldo**  
Through the Youth Ambassadors Program,  
the Sky's the Limit!
- 20** **Doris Alcántara**  
A Gilman Scholar Surveys Access for Deaf People  
in the Dominican Republic
- 22** **Fellowships Organization Spotlight**  
The Mandela Washington Fellowship Program
- 24** **Fadi El Halabi**  
A Mission Guided by the International Visitor Leadership (IVLP)  
Program



# Impact Where it is Least Expected: A Watershed Moment in South Africa



Johna Wright, a visually impaired woman with chronic health disabilities, discovered her calling at Mercer University's service scholars exchange to South Africa in 2018.

The South African business owner listened to the two young women, uncertainty painted on his features. He occasionally glanced to their male professor for confirmation of what he was being told.

As Johna Wright and her fellow student attempted to explain the reasons why this owner of a construction company needed to enhance his techniques for keeping inventory so that his workers would not unexpectedly be caught without the necessary materials to complete a day's work, it seemed as if their message was not getting across. It wasn't necessarily because their ideas were not sound, but rather because the business owner was not accustomed to taking business advice from women. He directed follow-up questions regarding the students' presentation to their professor, who respectfully directed the conversation back to the two young women.

If she were another person, she might have not been able to handle the situation quite as gracefully as she did, but Johna is not like other people.

"At first it was a bit shocking, but then I kind of remembered. I face the same things as a person with a disability in America." Johna Wright.

Johna was accustomed to asserting herself. She had done so for many years as a member of the National Federation of the Blind (NFB), a U.S.-based consumer organization of blind and visually impaired Americans. She had even had to fight to be accepted in the program in the months leading up to the trip. The professors considered that Mercer's care of duty extended to Johna in cases of personal injury, which they presumed would be more likely in the irregular terrain of the South African countryside. Johna was initially shocked at the faculty's reluctance to allow her to join the program. She wondered what to do. She went to her mentor David Davis, the director of the English department, to ask for advice. Her mentor urged her to go straight to the Dean's office, and if she couldn't speak with the Dean, to go to the study abroad department and tell them what happened. Knowing that she also struggled with some anxiety, her mentor offered to accompany her. She was soon allowed to go, after a process that drew out over subsequent weeks in which a chorus of her other professors registered their disapproval with the department, and the Dean spoke with her professor.

In South Africa, Johna approached the situation from the point of view that the business owner had likely been conditioned into his worldview

That was literally one of the coolest experiences ever. I loved it. People were so excited about their team. The Cape Town Stormers actually won, so it was really awesome.

---



from the environment in which he was raised. She and her teammate might have been the first women with expertise in inventory that he had encountered, and his reservations may have come more from disbelief than a misogynistic conviction that women should stay in their place. They proceeded as best they could with their presentation. They gracefully answered the owner's questions that were directed back to them by their professor, and they did their best to make sure that he felt that his input was being respected. By the second day, it seemed as if their efforts were paying off. The man was paying closer attention to what they were saying, and directing follow-up questions to them instead of the professor.

It might seem surprising, but with only one exception none of the 15 Mercer students accompanying Johna on her service scholars project came from a business background. They were working through majors as wide ranging as pre-med, psychology, computer science, education and in Johna's case, psychology. As part of their mandatory service scholars project, they might have carried out any variety of development initiatives abroad; however, since the professor assigned to the program for that year possessed a background in business consultancy, the focus shaped into a project to help grow small businesses in South Africa.

The students took a course on business practices during the previous spring semester. They studied a variety of topics including marketing, inventory, human resources, and building a brand. Following this crash course,

the plan was to spend three weeks in a rural South African community outside of Cape Town. Each week the students would work with a different set of businesses. Mondays would be dedicated to coursework for the students. On Tuesdays they would present on business practices to that week's entrepreneurs. On Wednesday and Thursday they would divide up into groups in order to get to know their assigned business inside and out. Over those days they would compose a report outlining their recommendations, and on Friday the plan was to present their recommendations to the entrepreneur.

Johna and her teammate consulted with entrepreneurs involved in an interesting variety of areas. The first week, they worked with a father and son team who owned a workshop designing furniture pieces. Noticing that there was a need for the business to enhance its marketing, the two young women put together a "look book" which featured some of the signature furniture pieces of the artisans. The second week, they met with the owner of the construction company, which did projects for local businesses. On the third week, they advised an operator of a nonprofit that taught music to children in local schools how to access more funding options by obtaining co-op status, a sort of nonprofit equivalent under South African law. The students spent a great deal of time researching the law so they could advise the owner. They also put together a list of government and foundation grants for which the owner would be eligible upon achieving co-op status.



Students took the chance on weekends to sightsee as a group, which included a couple high points for Johna. The first was a visit to a rugby match. At first the tour guides were anxious that she would not be able to enjoy it, not being able to see the players on the field. They suggested that she might want to do something else, but Johna insisted.

Johna had no difficulty enjoying the rugby match. The bus driver, with whom she had struck up a friendship, was available to describe the play-by-play action on the field, along with the background of what each occurrence meant.

“That was literally one of the coolest experiences ever. I loved it. People were so excited about their team. The Cape Town Stormers actually won, so it was really awesome.”

The tour guides also surprised Johna, and the rest of the students, with a visit to the Cape Town School for the Blind. They were guided around by one of the blind students. They learned about the courses offered at the school, and the institution's advocacy work on behalf of people with disabilities in South Africa.

Up to that point, Johnna was "dead set on going to graduate school to become a professor and teach forensic psychology." However, the visit to the school was only one of the experiences on the trip that got her thinking. In addition to learning about the school for the blind, Johna was surprised at the accessibility of Cape Town compared to her home community. There were curb cuts with truncated domes. Each intersection had an accessible pedestrian signal that audibly alerted you when it was okay to cross, and gave a different sound when you were running out of time.

While the community where students did their service project was more irregular than Johna was accustomed to, she was able to avoid mishaps by relying on her cane skills. She brought her computer with the JAWS screenreader on the trip. She collaborated with her teammate on their reports over Microsoft 365, as she found that it was more accessible than Google suite, which the rest of the students were using. She helped her teammates take pictures of the furniture pieces in the workshop at their first assignment, and gave feedback on the logo, which her teammate put together.



She was very familiar with advocacy from the U.S. perspective; however, it had never occurred to her that this kind of advocacy could take place, or that it could bear fruits, in a place like South Africa, or really anywhere else in the world. It was in this watershed moment while touring the School for the Blind that she discovered an avidity for international advocacy, and the direction that she would take in graduate school.

Following up with the businesses with which she consulted six months later, Johna also got to learn how her actions on the international stage could change a local community for the better. Using their new look book and social media presence, the father and son team expanded their business into Cape Town, significantly increasing their revenues. The owner of the music service had received his co-op status, and able to leverage all of the new funding opportunities that that entailed, along with a monthly stipend from the government.

But what about the owner of the construction business? Because he had continued to adopt the inventory system that the students put together for him, his jobs were experiencing fewer delays or setbacks. Our actions matter, even when it may not seem so. ■

# Playing along on the American Music Abroad Program

Experiencing the world can be a great way to make others want to experience it as well.



**TONY MEMMEL**

FROM:  
United States

TO:  
Countries in South & Central America, and Southeast & Central Asia

EXCHANGE TYPE:  
Arts & Culture Exchange

**BOARDING PASS**

Tony Memmel, a guitarist, vocalist and individual with a limb difference, has a lot to motivate him. He and his band have completed three tours in different parts of the world on the U.S. Department Of State-sponsored American Music Abroad (AMA) Program, and through those adventures he has had a platform to change perceptions of what it means to have a disability. In 2016 Tony's band had its first AMA tour in South and Central America, visiting Brazil, Uruguay, Paraguay, and Panama. In 2017, they toured Southeast Asia including Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, Cambodia, and Taiwan on another Arts Envoy Program. In 2019, they toured through Central Asia including Kazakhstan and Tajikistan, also through the Arts Envoy program.

According to the U.S. State Department's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA), American Music Abroad artists represent the new generation of musical ambassadors, who are reaching beyond concert halls to interact with other musicians and citizens around the globe. Each year, approximately 10 ensembles of American roots music in different genres are selected to embark on multi-country tours, where they engage with international audiences through public concerts, interactive performances with local musicians, lectures and demonstrations, workshops, jam sessions, and media interviews.

Tony was born without his right hand. His interest in the guitar started when he was in the eighth grade. The guitar was the central instrument in all of his favorite rock songs, and his best friend was really good. He figured out how to attach a pick to a special cast that could

slip over his stump. He learned some power chords, and before long he had formed a band with his friends. Talent shows, battles of the bands and even gigs soon followed.

Since then Tony has played with several different band ensembles, and his disability has given him a way to change other people's outlook.

"As I demonstrate my guitar method, it's often a great opportunity to talk about capability over disability, and other related topics. It's a special joy to work with musicians in these communities, and help them to develop their own adaptive methods toward making music accessible!"

Tony's tours have produced many memorable moments. The first place his band visited in 2017 was a school for children with disabilities in Singapore. After the band played a short concert, they taught an adaptive music clinic inviting the students to practice on borrowed guitars and ukuleles. When Tony was invited back a year later, he found many of the Singaporean students utilizing the adaptive methods that he had taught them to such an extent that they were able to join him in a jam session.

Another time, he was invited to play a mini concert in Indonesia at a pediatric oncology hospital, with an audience consisting mainly of young patients who had affected limbs amputated as part of cancer treatment. Tony was approached by many families before and after, who expressed a hopeful new outlook for their lives after meeting someone who could relate to them. "On these tours, music is the catalyst to unlocking imagination and new ideas in many people I meet," says Tony.



It's a special joy to work with musicians in these communities, and help them to develop their own adaptive methods toward making music accessible!

---

Most recently, Tony produced for AMA a recorded seven part mini-series to help U.S. Embassies abroad celebrate National Disability Employment Awareness Month (NDEAM), including ECA-sponsored artists with disabilities, and including for the first time, artists on the autism spectrum. The program enjoyed over 1.4 million views and was picked up by television and streaming stations across the U.S.

Since he was young, Tony was taught to travel with only what he could carry. As a result he learned to travel light. While on tour, he travels with a single roller bag and a guitar case slung over his shoulder with an attachable strap. He coordinates with host countries to supply as much as possible to limit what he and his group must bring. Though Tony has never needed to ask for any specific reasonable accommodations, he has always found that people are helpful wherever he has gone. They are often willing to carry his food tray for him or to let him into museums for free. Though these kindnesses may seem unnecessary, Tony accepts them with grace.

It's one of many ways that I am always learning to be flexible while traveling. "Hey, the world is crying out for kindness. It's a simple step for me to do for others, yes, and also to let others do for me. - Tony Memmel

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Tony and his band became tireless champions for ECA, keeping music engagements vibrant through virtual and hybrid programs. In summer 2020, Tony led a 6-week virtual Arts Envoy program in Kazakhstan called "Tuesdays with Tony" promoting inclusion and equal rights through



cultural exchange. Then in 2021, he collaborated with a popular Kazakhstani singer, Daneliya Tuleshova, on video renditions of the U.S. and Kazakhstan national anthems, garnering hundreds of thousands of views on social media and deepening Tony's connection with the people of Kazakhstan.

Always looking forward to what comes next, Tony continues to work on ways to bring his music to people in far-flung places. He has directed a documentary which, through interviews, archival footage and musical collaborations, tells the story of the history of jazz musicians who have performed as part of the American Music Abroad initiative. In collaboration with The Association of American Voices, he will lead two Youth Excellence on Stage (YES) programs, the goal of which will be to guide aspiring young music entrepreneurs from Uganda and Nigeria to develop themselves as professional musicians. ■

# Continuing a Life of Service in Peace Corps Response

When she submitted her initial application to serve in the education sector as a Peace Corps Response volunteer in Belize, Judy Jones knew that this was where she needed to be.



Judy spent most of her 30-year career as an educator focused on literacy. In one particular 10-year position, she provided professional development workshops to teachers on topics such as cooperative learning, working with English language learners, differentiating instruction, student-centered classrooms and the like for the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) Teacher Center. She visited teachers in their classrooms and recommended new ways to reach their students. She worked together with teachers to create and execute their lesson plans. Very important was assessing children's reading levels and working on improving their comprehension, vocabulary, writing, grammar and spelling.

After that career, she was ready for a new challenge, and she believed that Peace Corps, or something like it, would be a great opportunity in her retirement. The goal of many international development organizations is to enhance the quality of education in developing countries, and Judy knew a thing or two about this. While working with the teachers union, she accumulated a great deal of experience in teacher support and child development. She felt that this background would enable her to make a significant contribution as a volunteer with the Peace Corps. Yet, starting her international journey in her mid 50s, she needed to negotiate around her age-related health conditions to share her skills with an international volunteer program.

Since 1961, Peace Corps has been sending American volunteers around the world on service projects lasting two years, focusing

on initiatives in developing countries. Peace Corps Response, the newer segment of the Peace Corps, was originally designed under the Clinton administration as a way to deploy former Peace Corps volunteers (PCVs) back in the field to provide support in countries affected by natural disasters. In time and as partner countries requested more specialized expertise from PCVs, Peace Corps Response's mission expanded to encompass other areas of work such as designing better clean water systems, or providing professional development to teachers. It also dropped the requirement that Peace Corps responders had to be alumni of the two year flagship program, for which Judy had been deemed medically unfit due to her lower back issues.

Peace Corps Response was the perfect opportunity for Judy. She found her chance volunteering with a Belize-based project that is a partnership between Peace Corps Response and the Ministry of Education in Belmopan, the capitol of Belize. For four years, Peace Corps Response had been working to advance a more student-centered model focused on individualized learning, in a system with limited teacher support or resources.

Judy felt that this assignment would fit her very well. Volunteering with Peace Corps Response, she would use her extensive professional experience to support local second-grade educators to expand the reading skills of their students. Since the assignment would only last nine months, her lower back issues would not represent as much of a concern.





Judy found that her services were much needed. She served with 11 second-grade educators in seven different schools. Her teachers' students struggled greatly with their reading. Some children struggled to sound out three-letter words. Others had difficulty spelling their own names.

Meanwhile, most of her teachers had not had the opportunity to complete a thorough teaching credential program. Teacher training especially in literacy was not available in Belize. Most teachers used a curriculum that centered on lecture and recitation, and did not teach based on individual students' proficiency level. Materials including academic texts and storybooks were also in short supply. Students were expected to copy assigned lessons from a textbook to their notebook.

"I definitely felt for my teachers. They had significant challenges. They had large classes, limited materials, and kids who did not always come prepared from home."

Judy's assignment was mostly supporting teachers to develop more individualized literacy lesson plans for their classes. While their counterparts in places like the United States would have much of this curriculum developed for them, the educators in Belize were having to start from scratch, and they depended on the Peace Corps Response to support them in that process.

Judy was especially proud of one project in particular that she developed during her service in Belize. Many of the teachers with whom she was working had never had the opportunity to observe a fellow educator in the classroom. Teacher training in Belize included an in-class component; however, it was more of a practicum. In Judy's inter-visitation program, teachers would spend a day observing a peer. Much of the feedback that Judy received was that it gave teachers the chance to gather new techniques and lessons from each other, and it also increased more interaction with fellow teachers.

Judy first heard about Peace Corps Response from a friend with USAID, after she was found medically unfit to serve in Jamaica with the flagship program. That rejection was due to her lower back spinal stenosis and asthma issues.

Judy reflected that, in retrospect, being rejected for the Peace Corps flagship program in Jamaica was the path that led her to Belize, where it seemed as though the job was created just for her. With her specialty in supporting educators to teach literacy, the Literacy Support Specialist position in Belize was absolutely perfect for her.

There were other fortuitous signs that Judy was in the right place. First, her host's house was purple, Judy's favorite color. She also learned that a friend and former colleague in the New York City education system had grown up in Belize and had even attended one of the schools where Judy would be working! She had even discovered that her friend's aunt owned a bed-and-breakfast in Belmopan, which she stumbled upon during her explorations. The owner and Judy became fast friends. All of these coincidences and more provided further proof to Judy that she belonged in Belize instead of Jamaica.

Her disabilities were not an issue either. Judy had spent the year previous to her departure strengthening her back and core muscles with exercises that she had learned in physical therapy based on the recommendations of her care provider. The warm weather of Belize helped immensely as well. Judy's placement in the metropolitan area of Belmopan next to the medical office for Peace Corps volunteers, made it easier for her to obtain her asthma medications. This was an accommodation that the Peace Corps made for her condition.

Judy felt so positively about her program in Belize that she became the first Peace Corps Response volunteer to request an extension. "I just felt like there was still more work to do." And she looks forward to doing much more in the future. ■



# Tips for International Exchange Providers on Supporting People with Disabilities in Experiential Programs.

The individuals featured in the 2022 edition of the AWAY journal, focused on experiential programs, have mentored second grade teachers, addressed policies and practices for Deaf people in the Dominican Republic, consulted with business owners in South Africa and more. But what was this like from the point of view of those who supported them? Consider these tips for supporting people with disabilities on work, volunteer or intern programs overseas.

## 1 Start with the person.

International exchange programs are not interchangeable for everyone. Make sure that you start with the individual's goals and work with them to match with the appropriate program.

When Sara Giraldo Gavarria was accepted to participate in the Youth Ambassadors Program, sponsored by the U.S. Department Of State, she was the first blind participant that program staff had met. Amigos de las Americas scheduled a phone call to learn more about her and discuss how she might be successful on the program and what staff might do to render support.

## 2 Be clear on requirements.

People with disabilities know their limits better than anybody, and when they are acquainted with the requirements of the program they will make their own choice. At the same time program providers should not assume that discomfort or risk disqualify someone from participating.

The faculty member in charge of the Mercer University Service Scholars Program in South Africa doubted whether Johna Wright could be safe traveling to a rural South African community with her sighted peers. There was a great deal of uneven terrain in South Africa and program planners thought that Johna might trip and injure herself. The reality was that Johna possessed the ability to orient herself in unknown places and the social skills to obtain assistance from others when necessary.

## 3 Don't assume it will cost extra.

Sometimes exchange providers shut down the dialogue before it starts, when they assume that a disabled person requesting reasonable accommodations is automatically asking for money. Many reasonable accommodations don't cost anything. If funding is needed, there are a variety of ways of obtaining it that won't break the bank, but you cannot discover those without dialogue.

When Gallaudet University was looking for a service program for one of their students, they connected with Kaya Responsible Travel. When the exchange provider met with Gallaudet

to discuss the funding of communication access services, it turned out that Gallaudet was actually willing to cover those expenses.

“We put in a lot of time for a lot of different students. When you drag your feet with a student with a disability, you are going to end up with a lot more work than you would if you just sat down and had a conversation with the student early on about what they need.” Becca Aburrakia-Einhorn, Manager of Education Abroad, Gallaudet University

## 4 Seek Training.

Exchange providers should seek out training on disability for their staff on a regular basis. Such workshops might cover topics like advising, setting up a procedure for people to request reasonable accommodations, or strategies for providing specific types of reasonable accommodations. The NCDE has provided many of these trainings over the last few years. Get in touch with us to discuss your options.

Cultural Vistas periodically conducts brown bag sessions in which it trains staff on various topics in the field. In the spring of 2021, they invited NCDE to discuss disability inclusion techniques for one of those sessions.

## 5 Publicize a procedure for requesting reasonable accommodations.

Every program offers guidance for participants on visa applications, safety, cultural customs and more. Why not provide information on a procedure for requesting a reasonable accommodation? In guidance about health abroad, participants should also receive information about traveling with medications, service animals and adaptive equipment.

“In our applications we do currently ask if people need any special accommodations or if they have mobility or sight issues. In the application we specify that we are asking so we can provide accommodations. We phrase it in a way that it will not be part of the decision of whether to accept.”- Alex Kurki, Program Officer, Edmund S. Muskie Professional Fellowship Program & Exchange Visitor Programs at Cultural Vistas. (The Muskie Program is sponsored by the U.S. Department of State)

In conclusion, supporting persons with reasonable accommodations on experiential exchange is not much different from any other international program. Start with “yes”, approach the situation with an open mind, and refrain from applying higher safety standards based on disability. ■

“A student who you have gone the extra mile with to help them with their situation is much more likely to actually carry through with the program while someone else who might find it easier to find a lot of different programs that they have access to, might change their mind ten different times. It is to our benefit. If we do the work they come with us.”

—Heilwig Jones, owner, Kaya Responsible Travel

# Finding Confidence Through Wheelchair Basketball



Adaptive sports are about more than just athletics.

Playing a sport like soccer or basketball can get you in shape. It can also introduce you to friends and mentors. It can lead to college, a career and a family. It can even connect you with the world.

Ever since he was a young child, Siphamandla (Sips) Gumbi was passionate about sports. Growing up in the town of Umlazi in the province of Kwazulu-Natal, South Africa in the 1980s during apartheid, the sport that was popular in his community was soccer. His father had built up quite a reputation for himself after he played for two of the top national soccer teams including AmaZulu, and he passed his passion on to his son.

At the age of five Sips became a wheelchair user following the removal of a tumor in which he acquired a spinal cord injury. After becoming a person with a disability, his father continued to work with him and encourage him in soccer in part because sports was something that both father and son were passionate about, and because their Zulu culture taught them that life throws unexpected situations your way, and you have to rise above them. Soccer continued to be an important outlet for Sips, even as he went to boarding school to make up for lost time before attending high school in his Township. In high

school, he continued playing soccer and he also pursued track and field.

He would not discover wheelchair basketball until a friend introduced him to it in 2007, when he was a student majoring in sports sciences at the University of Durban-Westville, now a branch of the University of KwaZulu-Natal. "I just fell in love with it and I never really looked back." Soon he was called up to compete on South Africa's national team which in 2007 won the All Africa Games in Algeria. Eventually his team qualified for the 2008 Paralympics in Beijing where they showed their skills competing against the best teams in the world. That continues to hold a special place in Sips's memory, but after competing in 2008 and the 2012 paralympics, he knew that his sports career could not go on forever.

"It gave me a chance to see what other communities are doing in order to reach their level of greatness in terms of play and also getting involved with making friends around the world to learn about what people with the same disability are doing."

Fortunately, through playing sports, other opportunities presented themselves. After graduating college he got a job working for the government. A few years later, his former



“It gave me a chance to see what other communities are doing in order to reach their level of greatness in terms of play and also getting involved with making friends around the world to learn about what people with the same disability are doing.”

---



paralympic coach told him about a position with Chairman Industries, a local distributor of mobility equipment, which his former coach was now leading.

After traveling the world and starting his career, the challenges facing those around him became all the more stark. It was clear through his world travels that life for people with disabilities everywhere was difficult, but traveling also showed him how much more difficult it was in South Africa. A majority of the athletes with disabilities that he knows tend not to meet their significant other, establish a family, obtain a degree or get a job. For most, their main source of income is a pension which amounts to around 1700 RAND, or US\$115 per month. The difference between the life that Sips was living and the lives of other South African disabled athletes in his community became extremely sharp.

Appreciating how wheelchair basketball and soccer gave him a greater sense of confidence and self-efficacy, Sips decided to focus on coaching wheelchair basketball clinics in his local community after he finished up with the Paralympics. He established an organization focused on teaching young people with disabilities how to play wheelchair basketball.

Many of the people that he has coached have gone on to win national championships of their own. Some have competed in the South Africa Paralympic selection. He coached a girls team which represented South Africa in Paralympic qualifiers.

For Sips, sports are about teamwork. In wheelchair basketball there are individuals who are amputees, those with spinal cord injuries, polio or cerebral palsy. Some might be able to throw the ball from one end of the court to the other. They might be able to lean over and grab the ball off the ground. Others might not have this level of function. Each player gets a rank between 1 and 4.5 based on their level of function. Each wheelchair basketball team must have five players with individual ratings adding up to 14 or less. Much like a game of chess, it is necessary to create a strategy that caters to the unique abilities of each person and results in a win for the entire team.

“I tell my players to think of life as a new team that you are facing on the court. Each day you face a team with a different approach. That is life itself. It brings you a lot of things you’re not expecting but you have to find a way to maneuver around those challenges.”



After a few years of doing these clinics, he wanted to learn about how he could take his coaching to the next level. A colleague with a disability had recently completed an U.S. Department of State-sponsored program and through this friend Sips discovered the Global Sports Mentoring Program (GSMP). GSMP brings athletes to the United States for five weeks of mentorship to learn how to advance the participation of women and girls and people with disabilities in sports.

The Global Sports Mentoring Program is an international leadership development initiative that was launched in 2012 by the State Department. It now consists of two pillars that focus on advancing gender equality (i.e., Empowering Women and Girls through Sports program) and disability rights (i.e., Sport for Community program). These five-week, immersive mentorship experiences focus on empowering international delegates to serve their local communities by increasing access to and opportunities for participation in sports.

After a pre-orientation and post-orientation in Tennessee and Washington DC, Sips spent three weeks at the University of Texas learning about adaptive sports programs for people with disabilities in the United States. He visited a

recreation center open to all, including people with disabilities. It had adaptive equipment such as rowing machines and handcycles that could be used by people with disabilities.

He was astonished at the amount of resources available to disabled athletes in the United States. In addition to the adaptive equipment, there were coaches with specialized knowledge. Sips encountered disabled athletes who spent up to seven hours a day training and preparing. They started learning the sport as small children. Athletes in his club back home spent no more than 4 hours per week practicing and they might not start till their mid twenties. The program galvanized him to look for ways to get disabled athletes started earlier, and to get them better supports.

“We are not quite there. For us it came naturally because we are athletes. We love the game, but there is a massive difference in the level of playing from the US, Australia and UK compared to what we have in Africa.”

His exchange experience continued even after he had returned to South Africa. As an alumnus of the GSMP, he gained access to a whole network of alumni dedicated to increasing access to sports for women and girls and





people with disabilities. When the COVID-19 pandemic hit at the beginning of 2020, GSMP alumni teamed up to provide resources and support for impacted sports communities. Sips' basketball clinics were noticed by a 2019 GSMP alumnus from Zambia who he met through these alumni activities. That acquaintance ultimately led to an opportunity for Sips to travel to Zambia to carry out

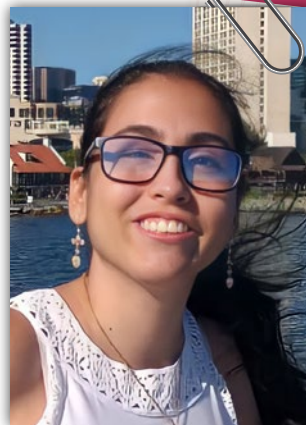
wheelchair basketball clinics in his colleague's community. He has received invitations to do clinics in other countries as well.

Sips' dream is to establish an adaptive recreation center in South Africa like the one that he saw in Texas. He knows that he can't do it alone and that it will take a team effort from the community, but it's worth a try. ■



# Through the Youth Ambassadors Program, the Sky's the Limit!

This visually impaired woman from Colombia volunteered in San Francisco and learned about service projects during a three week program in the United States, all before graduating high school.



Sara Giraldo's penchant for service started well before she participated in the U.S Department of State's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA) sponsored Youth Ambassadors Program at the age of 18. For three years, she had volunteered with the local YMCA in her home city of Armenia in Colombia. Her passion for international culture went back at least as far. At the age of 14, she started studying English at the Colombo Americano, a local center dedicated to the promotion of English and U.S. culture.

She first learned about ECA's Youth Ambassadors Program from the EducationUSA advising center, located in the Colombo Americano. EducationUSA is a network of over 400 advising centers worldwide, which provides international students with the information and resources to access professional and academic development in the United States. Excited for the opportunity, she promptly submitted her application, yet that was not to be her year.

Ever persistent, she re-applied the following year and was accepted into the 2018 cohort of students from Colombia and Ecuador, who would be spending the next three weeks volunteering and learning about service projects in the United States. Upon returning to their home country, they would be responsible for carrying out a service project of their very own in their local community.

The program was arranged in three phases. They spent the first week engaged in volunteer work in San Francisco. They served meals at St. Antony's Foundation and looked after children between ages six and ten at a Boys And Girls Club. They also volunteered at local high schools sharing about their cultures.

Sara and her peers spent the second week in Wisconsin experiencing American life with a host family and taking classes in community service. That week was also spent putting together the plan for their service projects which they would carry out after returning home.

Sara really enjoyed spending time with her host family, who lived on a farm in the country. Upon her arrival at their home, she brought them some coffee and lechona, a Colombian cultural staple. Her host family also shared American coffee with her. Her favorite activity was riding her American family's horses.

Students spent weekday mornings in their classes, where they learned about setting goals, planning objectives, measuring outcomes, identifying target communities, and narrowing down their initiatives.

They spent the last week in Washington DC, taking in the sights, and learning about American culture and history.



“I feel like in Colombia they need to have more people concerned about volunteering, and it is not very popular there. I was surprised to see so many people doing it in the United States.”

In order to prepare a plan for reasonable accommodations, staff of World Learning and Amigos de las Americas organized a phone call with Sara. Since she was the first blind person that they had worked with on the Youth Ambassadors Program, they wanted to make sure that they were prepared.

Yet there was little need for concern. Sara was able to get a great deal of support from fellow Colombian and Ecuadorian students, who were accustomed to assisting where needed. The children with whom she volunteered also had questions about her eyesight, which she easily answered.

She had never volunteered with people who didn't know her at all. She was worried about how people would react. Wouldn't she just get in the way? But she realized that while there were things that she couldn't do such as sealing the food packages,, there were also things that she could do such as packing the rice and veggies. So she sought out and volunteered in ways that she could contribute.

When she returned home, Sara joined forces with the local YMCA to organize her community project called Blind Mind, a three-month program designed to increase disability awareness in children ages six to ten. Meeting weekly with her group of children, she shared about disabilities from her experience and through documentaries. She also found a soccer ball with bells in it, and showed the children how blind people could play soccer.

At the end of the year, she and all of the other youth ambassador participants were invited to Bogota to present on the actions and outcomes of their projects.

After ECA's Youth Ambassadors Program, Sara went on to take classes in modern languages, special education, and child development at the University of Quindío. She spent a year at Mesa Community College in Arizona as a participant in the U.S. Department of State sponsored Community College Initiative Program, which provides scholarships for individuals from select countries to spend up to one academic year of non-degree study at a United States community college. She may pursue a career in international development or education, or she might do something in the area of special education. At this point in time, the sky's the limit! ■



# A Gilman Scholar Surveys Access for Deaf People in the Dominican Republic

If the program that you want to do is not available, create it.



DORIS ALCÁNTARA

FROM:  
United States

TO:  
Dominican Republic

EXCHANGE TYPE:  
Internship Abroad

BOARDING PASS

That is what Doris Alcántara did during her Junior year at Gallaudet University, when she interned in the Dominican Republic for three months with the support of the U.S. Department of State's Benjamin A. Gilman International Scholarship which supports American undergraduates to study or intern abroad.

Doris knew that she wanted to do a service project in another country. Her late father was from the Dominican Republic, and she had always been interested in that country. So she started to research her options.

"I searched online to see what information I could find regarding the Deaf community in the Dominican Republic and that's when I came across ANSORDO."

The Asociación Nacional de Sordos de la República Dominicana (ANSORDO) is an association of Deaf people that advocates for the rights and inclusion of Deaf Dominicans. "Growing up, I had gone to the Dominican Republic on a few occasions, and I had a growing curiosity about the everyday lives of Deaf Dominicans" says Doris. "Determined to learn more, I reached out to ANSORDO." After a video interview with the leaders of the organization, she had found her opportunity.

She put together a research proposal and submitted it for approval to Gallaudet University's board of trustees and institutional review board. Soon her proposal was accepted. All she had to do now was figure out how to pay for it.

"I was actually pretty concerned about that aspect for a while being that I come from a low-

income background. Then, one day, I came across a Gilman scholarship flier in the lobby of my dorm building."

The Gilman Scholarship enables U.S. students of limited financial means to study or intern abroad, providing them with skills critical to U.S. national security and economic prosperity. Applicants must be Pell grant recipients. The Institute of International Education (IIE) has administered the program since its inception in 2001 on behalf of the U. S. State Department. After meeting with an advisor in the university's international education department to learn more about the scholarship, Doris submitted her application.

Doris Alcántara knows the value of education and communication access. All through high school, she had had access to neither as a Deaf Latina woman. As a result she had to stumble her way through her education with inadequate supports graduating with a 1.8 GPA.

Her experience as a student at Gallaudet University, where all classes were delivered in American Sign Language (ASL), was as different from high school as night from day. A recruitment advisor took the time to get to know Doris beyond her grade point average and test scores. Gallaudet University's Jumpstart Program, designed to prepare incoming students who previously had limited access to education for college life, gave her a chance to strengthen her sign language and academic skills before her first semester. Jumpstart also continued to provide support after Doris started classes.





“While everyone else saw a lousy student, Gallaudet saw a person with potential who just hadn’t been provided with the right resources.”  
-Doris Alcántara.

On track to graduate from Gallaudet magna cum laude, Doris wondered how education and communication access could be available to more Deaf people especially in the Dominican Republic. In the summer of 2018, she would get her chance to explore those questions when she set off for her internship, where she would spend the next three months.

During her internship with ANSORDO, Doris primarily focused on supporting the organization to build its advocacy platform. She did this by researching daily life including social and political developments for Deaf Dominicans.

Her project with ANSORDO squared perfectly with her senior thesis, titled “The Current Status of Deaf Education in the Dominican Republic.” She developed her project in collaboration with her mentor, Dr. Catherine O’Brien, one of the top researchers at Gallaudet University. The purpose was to learn about the state of education for Deaf people from the point of view of parents, students and advocates. Another goal was to learn about the perceptions of teachers of Deaf students and the resources that they felt were necessary to carry out their work.

Through ANSORDO she was able to visit schools, meet with institute directors, interview the minister of education, and converse with a senator.

Doris supported ANSORDO in other ways as well. She provided basic administrative support. She assisted with promotion and outreach. She also contributed to the organization on community and cultural events.

Since most of her internship was working with the Deaf community, Doris did not encounter many accessibility issues, nor did she need to request any reasonable accommodations. That said, she did find that there were some barriers related to communication that she experienced along with other Deaf Dominicans. For example, since the Dominican Republic has no free video relay service like in the United States, she could not simply call a store and ask if they had something, and instead had the option of either relying on a hearing person to make the call for her or showing up in person.

The bigger barrier that Doris encountered was the low expectations and misconceptions of hearing Dominicans.

It was pretty common for people to associate the idea of deafness with being incapable in ways beyond the inability to hear, which is a barrier Deaf individuals face globally. One of the many impacts of ANSORDO’s work is advocating for Deaf people to be viewed as equal.

After returning to the United States, Doris presented her thesis at the conference of the American Educational Research Association (AERA) in Toronto, Canada in 2019. She was the only undergraduate student to present an original project.

“Overall, my internship was a humbling experience. I am vastly appreciative of all the resources and opportunities I have been given. I am looking forward to the undergoing shifts happening on the international stage. I strongly believe that through cross cultural communications, the Deaf community can foster the developments needed to create equitable and inclusive environments.” Doris Alcántara ■

# Spotlight on Fellowship Organizations

## The Mandela Washington Fellowship Program



To learn more about the strategies that organizations have implemented to support participants with disabilities in experiential exchange programs, National Clearinghouse on Disability and Exchange staff caught up with IREX, the implementing organization for the State Department-sponsored Young African Leaders Mandela Washington Fellowships program, to get a sense of what diversity and inclusion looks like for them.

## What motivates you to welcome Persons with Disabilities (PWDs) on the Mandela Washington Fellowship?

In general, IREX is devoted to promoting more just, prosperous, and inclusive societies around the world, and supporting the full participation of people with disabilities in all our program activities is fundamental to fulfilling this mission. IREX strives to strengthen our own knowledge of best practices in universal design and reasonable accommodations from program inception to execution. In terms of the Mandela Fellowship specifically, our disability inclusion focus meshes with the DEIA priority of the U.S. State Department, our program sponsor.

The Mandela Washington Fellowship has been a tremendous opportunity for our team to refine best practices and develop new strategies to support Fellows, because of the size and scope of the program, as well as the consistently high percentage of Fellows who request accommodations (4.5% per year or more than 260 since the inception of the Fellowship in 2014).

# How do you accommodate fellows with disabilities?

IREX has worked closely with the U.S. State Department's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, to encourage people with disabilities to apply to the Fellowship by sharing clear guidance on what 'accommodations' are available through the program. Providing specific examples is useful to helping potential applicants know what to expect and understand that we are serious about working to meet their needs. We approach each Fellow as an individual to determine what accommodations are best, knowing there is no one size fits all answer. We have a great deal of experience providing interpretation, mobility and orientation training, accessibility equipment, and other services to our Fellows as appropriate.

Part of this also involves working with the educational institutions who host Mandela Washington Fellows at their six-week Leadership Institutes. To prepare Institute Partners to best support Fellows with disabilities, the annual Institute Partner Retreat includes a session on Disability Inclusion that familiarizes Institute staff with their role in arranging accommodations and offers best practices and case studies for supporting complex Fellow needs. We've created a guidance document, "Hosting Fellows with Disabilities", that outlines both Partners' roles in the accommodations process and the ways in which the Fellowship Team supports partners in hosting Fellows with disabilities. Furthermore, the "Disability Sensitization Guidelines" and "Disability Inclusion Checklist" both provide practical guidance to ensure that the Institute is fully accessible to Fellows with disabilities.

Once Fellows with disabilities are selected for the Fellowship, they receive a detailed questionnaire, developed in consultation with MIUSA, that identifies their individual accommodations needs. Questionnaires are customized based on the fellow's disability and may cover considerations for vision, hearing, mobility, and medical disabilities. The Fellowship Team then schedules individual calls with each Fellow to give them the opportunity to ask questions about the support they will receive, clarify any accommodations needs, and set clear expectations for their Institute experience. Using the information from the questionnaire and calls, the Fellowship Team collaborate closely with Institute Partners and external vendors to confirm all accommodations arrangements, including but not limited to ADA-compliant housing and transportation, CART and ASL interpretation, laptops with screen reader software, rental wheelchairs and mobility scooters, or orientation and mobility training so everything is in place before Fellows arrive to the United States. For Fellows who are Deaf or hard of hearing, the Fellowship Team will also partner with Gallaudet University to provide a virtual ASL toolkit and in-person ASL training prior to the start of Institutes.

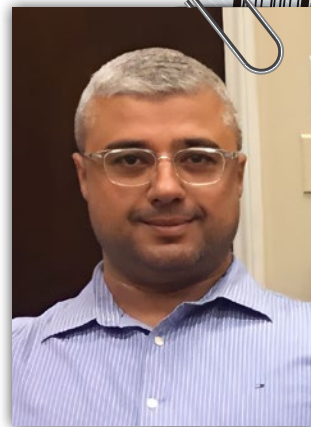
After they arrive, all Fellows with disabilities receive two surveys asking whether they are able to fully participate in their Institutes with their current accommodations. If any adjustments are needed, the Fellowship Team will follow up with Fellows, Institute staff, and vendors to make necessary adjustments. ■

To learn more about the Mandela Washington Fellowships visit

<https://www.irex.org/project/mandela-washington-fellowship-young-african-leaders>



# 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.

"Before this I always looked for ways that I could adapt to the system, but I never considered that the system itself needed to be changed."

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.

"That was the first time that I was exposed to disability and human rights, and I had to do a lot of work to equip myself to understand what it means to be a disability advocate."

“That was the first time that I was exposed to disability and human rights, and I had to do a lot of work to equip myself to understand what it means to be a disability advocate.”

---

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."







---

Before this I always  
looked for ways that  
I could adapt to the system,  
but I never considered that  
the system itself  
needed to be changed.

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. ■



**This issue is available  
in alternative formats.**

Contact NCDE:  
[www.miusa.org/NCDE](http://www.miusa.org/NCDE)



Information provided throughout the A World Awaits You (AWAY) publication has been compiled by the National Clearinghouse on Disability and Exchange.

The National Clearinghouse on Disability and Exchange is a project of the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, designed to increase the participation of people with disabilities in international exchange between the United States and other countries, and is supported in its implementation by Mobility International USA.

**Editor: Justin Harford**

The information in this publication is provided for general informational purposes only. References do not constitute endorsement of any websites or other sources.

Copyright © 2022 Mobility International USA.  
All rights reserved. This publication may be printed for educational purposes only.



**Mobility International USA**  
132 E. Broadway, Suite 343  
Eugene, Oregon USA 97401

Tel: +1-541-343-1284  
Email: [clearinghouse@miusa.org](mailto:clearinghouse@miusa.org)  
Website: [www.miusa.org](http://www.miusa.org)