

Kristen Popham

Taking Up Space in France

Kristen Popham spent the 2021-2022 academic year teaching English in France as a Fulbright English Teaching Assistant (ETA). This program places U.S. participants in classrooms abroad to provide assistance to the local English teachers. ETAs help teach English language while serving as cultural ambassadors for the United States. The age and academic level of the students varies by country, ranging from kindergarten to university level. Because of her chronic health disabilities, Kristen's ETA experience would include more than grading assignments, leading classroom activities, and exploring her host community.

By negotiating accommodations for her chronic health disabilities with locals and healthcare providers, a Fulbright English Teaching Assistant learned to assert herself.

Proudly Fighting to be Believed

At the age of 12, Kristen was diagnosed with juvenile idiopathic arthritis, uveitis, and ankylosing spondylitis – autoimmune diseases that have never gone into remission and that have shaped much of her experience growing up. Identifying as chronically ill, she requires a variety of medications to be administered intravenously on a monthly basis. She doesn't hesitate to ask for assistance. She advocates to pre-board on flights so that she can have extra time to get settled in. Kristen considers herself to be a proud disabled woman. At the same time, she finds

“These students taught me that I want to incorporate teaching and youth engagement into my future career in some way. I had the time of my life as their instructor.”

Kristen in Paris, France during her Fulbright year, 2022.



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that she sometimes must fight to be believed in certain spaces.

“I often ‘pass’ as able-bodied because of my illness’ invisibility; this gives me many privileges but also comes with challenges as a chronically ill woman fighting to be believed. I am someone who navigates my life with an uncertain relationship with my body and a close relationship with pain.”

It might not be a surprise, then, that Kristen was a bit anxious about disclosing her disabilities on her Fulbright application, fearing that it would be a liability or that it would not be believed. Kristen reflects that despite her anxiety about disclosing her disabilities, “my disability is so closely tied to my experiences, that it became a necessary part of my personal statements and certainly shined through in my application.”

How to Cover a Chronic Health Condition in France

Despite her concerns, Fulbright staff responded with support. They worked to find what information they could for Kristen about disability in France. Also, from previous experiences, Kristen had learned how to obtain health insurance coverage under the French healthcare system.

Having a pre-existing condition that involves complex ongoing medical treatment can be one of the most challenging disability-related barriers to study abroad. Many travel health insurance providers do not offer coverage to pay for treatment. Although some countries have nationalized healthcare, it will only cover medical emergencies for foreigners. At the same time, individuals who face these barriers would potentially be overlooked at an in-person orientation or promotion event because their conditions are not visible.

Fortunately, France not only has nationalized healthcare, it is also reasonably manageable for foreigners to access services. According

to French law, all residents, both French and otherwise, must have healthcare. Before someone can be covered in France, they must spend three months in the country to gain their residence. Until then, the individual must pay for their own healthcare costs. After that, the national plan covers 70% of an individual's fees, leaving them to pay for the rest. It also may reimburse them up to 70% for previous medical costs incurred during the three-month period before coverage kicks in.

Kristen initially paid for her healthcare expenses on credit cards while waiting for coverage. After three months, that coverage started, and the French government reimbursed her for its share of medical expenses, allowing her to pay down the cards. At the end of the program, Fulbright reimbursed Kristen for her copays.

Kristen at a hospital in Paris, receiving an infusion for her rheumatoid arthritis.



Accessing Exclusive Spaces through Disability

“My autoimmune disease has enabled me to enter spaces that my able-bodied peers cannot. I converse in French with disabled women in infusion rooms across the country about the experience of being sick in their country. I learn the intricacies of a social welfare system from which the United States can learn. My biggest concern going abroad turned into my greatest asset.”

Kristen believes, based on her experience in France, that there are a lot of things that the United States could learn. The way that the French healthcare system supports the aspirations of international students and English teachers is unusual. On the other hand, she noted some areas where France could learn from the United States. While in the United States people are more in the habit of embracing their differences, in France sometimes that could be overshadowed by a notion of a “universal Frenchness.” Sometimes her French friends could not understand her disability identity, responding that she was just sick.

ETA is All About the Students

The biggest highlight of Kristen's experience was the students she taught. Her experience at Lycée Julie Victoire Daubié was so meaningful, and she integrated some of her favorite academic activities learned from the United States. In one case, the students debated the death penalty in a moot court. In another instance, they put Goldilocks on a mock trial. In another, they conducted a model UN simulation involving the United States and Russia. Students got so excited and riled up during the simulation that the teachers had to pause the class and remind them that it was only a game!



Kristen at the Jardin du Luxembourg.

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