

# A World Awaits You

A Journal on People with Disabilities  
Traveling with a Purpose

## Intersections ABROAD

Travelers with disabilities explore identity  
& diversity through international exchange.



A Publication of the National Clearinghouse  
on Disability and Exchange



As a first-generation college graduate with a disability, I actually studied abroad and I got to see firsthand that I am capable of traveling on my own, that being disabled doesn't have to restrict my options or possibilities. And that experience and self-confidence have stayed with me and continue to push me and trust myself if I want to do something.

— *Gilman Scholar to Australia*

# STUDY OR INTERN ABROAD WITH GILMAN

If you are receiving a federal Pell Grant, apply to study or intern abroad with the Gilman Scholarship Program. The Gilman-McCain Scholarship Program supports children of active-duty military personnel who receive any type of Title IV federal financial aid to study or intern abroad. Gilman seeks to diversify the undergraduate student population that studies abroad, and we are proud to support students with disabilities from a wide range of backgrounds. Additionally, studying a critical need language in sign language is now eligible for the Critical Need Language Award.

Learn more on our website: [gilmanscholarship.org](http://gilmanscholarship.org)

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# Viewing Identity through a Global Prism

We all experience identity in different ways, but going abroad often challenges us to explore identity in new and sometimes surprising ways. In different cultural contexts, you might find that local people or even fellow travelers perceive you differently from the way you're perceived at home, which in turn might affect how you perceive yourself. Certain aspects of your identity may be outwardly "visible" or stand out more than others. You might find that, while overseas, some of the aspects of your identity that are the most meaningful to you, perhaps race, cultural heritage or disability, might seem to be overshadowed by other aspects of your identity that you don't often think about back home, such as nationality, perceived wealth, and privilege.

As a project of the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA), we at the National Clearinghouse on Disability and Exchange are committed to upholding the ECA Diversity Statement\* by consistently linking disability inclusion with diversity. We celebrate disability as an aspect of diversity which too often gets overlooked in diversity initiatives, but at the same time we recognize that people with disabilities have additional aspects of identity that are important to them and deserve space.

In this issue of *A World Awaits You*, we joyfully explore these questions: In what ways do our identities influence our international exchange experiences, ranging from the destinations we select to our interactions with people we meet abroad? And, in turn, how might international exchange present opportunities for

us to understand identity in ways that aren't as accessible at home?

To bring these important questions to life, we asked international exchange alumni with disabilities to reflect on their own experiences related to the dynamics and interplay of disability, nationality, race, socioeconomic status, gender, sexual orientation, cultural heritage, religion and more, all while traveling abroad. What they shared was, at times, refreshing, uplifting, frustrating, illuminating, challenging - sometimes all at once!

In carrying out Fulbright research on how Indian disabled women combat ableism, Istou Diallo found herself nourishing her own disability identity. At the same time, having been made hyper aware of her identities as a Black American in India, Istou formed new friendships that interrupted isolation with community and belonging.

A fascination with the culture of politics and identity of Latin America is what drew Emely Recinos to study in Buenos Aires. But to the local people she encountered there, Emely's native Spanish fluency and physical appearance as a Salvadoran American prompted challenging questions about her nationality and culture.

Gillian Giles learned to take Amsterdam's progressive image with a grain of salt. But without losing sight of the dynamics of racism, sexism, and colonization, they cherished the liberating experiences of meeting other queer people of color, celebrating with Amsterdam's Surinamese community, and practicing self-care.

*“I firmly believe that understanding yourself also means understanding your context in the world around you. And I’m looking to continuously do that through travel.”*

– Gillian Giles, study abroad alum

An insatiable traveler who is proud of his autistic identity and lifelong advocacy, David Sharif has sought out international opportunities to honor the legacies and traditions of his Jewish heritage, whether in Israel, Ecuador, or Europe – even when such experiences can be solemn and emotional.

Born in London and raised in Texas, Geraldine Dang felt she had few connections to her Asian heritage. An offer to study abroad in Japan and later intern abroad in Singapore presented an opportunity to explore this side of herself – all while broadening her global Deaf community.

Confronted with ableism, sexism and racism on a Barcelona tour bus, Johileny Merán mustered the strength to advocate for herself. The experience shone a spotlight on how her identities as a disabled Afrolatina woman are

not only inextricably linked, but they also shape the way she experiences the world.

We’re grateful to these exchange alumni for trusting us with their inherently personal stories and did not take this task of publishing them lightly. As you read about their experiences and the accompanying diversity resources, we invite you to reflect on your own identity and the potential of international exchange to deepen your own appreciation and understanding of yourself!

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 (MIUSA). ■

*\*ECA Diversity Statement*

*The Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs of the United States Department of State strives to ensure that its efforts reflect the diversity of U.S. society and societies abroad. The Bureau seeks and encourages the involvement of people from traditionally underrepresented audiences in all its grants, programs and other activities and in its workforce and workplace. Opportunities are open to people regardless of their race, color, national origin, sex, age, religion, geographic location, socio-economic status, disability, sexual orientation or gender identity. The Bureau is committed to fairness, equity and inclusion.*

# MOVING WITH Intention



*Take a cleansing breath. Open up your heart.  
Shine through the crown of your head.  
Set your intention.*

These mantras are common among practitioners of yoga. Could they not also apply to international travelers?

Istou Diallo practices both, having discovered one through the other. Before moving to India to conduct her Fulbright research, she took a few yoga classes for fun. “I didn’t know at the time that yoga would majorly contribute in my journey of becoming more comfortable with my disability and, by extension, myself.”

As someone with a limb difference that affects her arm, Istou knew her yoga practice would look a bit different than her classmates. Still, as she stepped into Chennai’s Rutland Gate Yoga Studio, Istou adapted the poses to fit her body and not the other way around. “It was important for me to remind myself the purpose of my practice: honoring my body and finding community.” She carried this intention with her at the start of each class and for that hour of hatha, any shame seemed to dissipate.

Thankfully, Istou found her second home at Rutland Gate Yoga Studio, where teachers, staff and fellow yogis all welcomed her into the space. With the help of props and guidance from instructors, Istou moved naturally into various ashtanga and vinyasa poses without having to perform or hide herself.

The safety and sanctuary Istou found at the studio was in direct contrast to the environment just outside.

There was the staring. After arriving in Delhi, she was met with stares, and they never faded. More disconcerting still was the frequent shouting from strangers determined to guess Istou’s nationality or migrant status. “Are you from Nigeria? South Africa?”

**Name:**

**Istou Diallo**

**Home Institution:**

**John Jay College of  
Criminal Justice**

**Fields of Study:**

**Forensic Psychology,  
Gender Studies**

**Programs:**

**Fulbright-Nehru U.S.  
Student Research  
Program**

**Destination:**

**Chennai, India**

they would call. Even acquaintances could not seem to fathom that a Black person could be from the United States. The anti-Blackness Istou experienced was all the more bewildering and frustrating because it was the first time she ever felt hyper-aware of her Blackness. Back home in a city as diverse as New York, a proud first-generation American born to Guinean parents, she didn't think about her Blackness to the same degree, nor did she ever have to convince anyone of her American status. In India, she was fighting for her identity. And she fought alone. "At the time, I was the only Black person in my entire cohort. There was no one that I could really look to or go to, to truly empathize with me in a way that I needed."

That is until Istou had a chance encounter with a local Black woman who was born and raised in India, the daughter of Nigerian immigrants. Istou flooded her with questions about what it was like maneuvering India as a Black woman. Thankfully, the two hit it off and even traveled throughout Northern India together. "It was one of the best experiences I'd had. I felt like I could finally breathe. I didn't realize how much of a huge toll it was feeling so isolated." Immediately after, Istou was introduced to a fellow Black American Fulbright grantee who was visiting nearby Chennai. They immediately clicked, cathartically swapping stories, experiences, and coping strategies. "Representation is so important in all spaces no matter who you are. It feels great to have someone who has gone through similar experiences as you."

Istou's new friend also introduced her to Fulbright Noir. Much in the way that yoga had provided a safe space Istou could honor her body and find community, so too did Fulbright Noir. This digital platform on Instagram, founded by a Black Fulbright alumna was created to connect with other Black Fulbrighters globally, celebrate each other's grants, and share experiences of being Black in different countries.

"It warmed my heart so much to see Black Fulbrighters uplifting one another. Having that representation—even digitally, was amazing." Istou even joined the group as it mobilized together over Zoom. "We just talked about everything that we were feeling, especially in light of all the civil unrest happening right now. It was such an important time for all of us to come together."

With the anti-blackness Istou experienced, she still reminisces on the intimate connections she cultivated; some organized by Fulbright and others by chance. Of the many connections, she often thinks warmly of the generosity of her host family who invited her to celebrate Pongal—a four-day-long harvest festival, celebrated widely in South India. Istou also thinks back on the friendships she valued most,



especially with her next-door neighbors who introduced her to the young adult subculture of India.

There is a lesson here—no experience can be defined on a binary scope, especially an experience as extreme as Istou’s was. Whenever asked how life during her Fulbright in India was, Istou usually responds with transformative. “It’s the only word that accurately describes everything I went through and how nuanced life can be.”

Reflecting on the pre-departure seminars and other preparatory programming, Istou believes there was a missed opportunity to provide a more holistic perception of Black people in India.

“The conversations about culture and what our interactions would be like applied to the white fellows, but I didn’t relate to them. It would have been amazing to have Black representation and not sugar-coat how things would be so I could have mentally prepared.” (See *note at the end of this article.*)

Although disability had taken a back seat to her Blackness in terms of her personal interactions in India, Istou stayed the course executing her Fulbright research on Notions of Disability in Indian Society, examining disability justice work and legislation that took place from region to region. Istou suspects that few Fulbright applications propose research on the topic of disability, which may have set her application apart.

Istou paid particular focus to the strategies by which Indian disabled women combatted stigma, including both personal and political tactics. She recalls learning about a disabled woman who was a respected local leader and implemented initiatives that uplifted

the entire community. Istou also visited a community of disabled women who trained one another in income-generating skills. These women craftily asserted their independence, subverting the societal expectation that women rely on marriage for financial security.

Istou’s Fulbright research may have started as an opportunity to approach disability objectively in an academic way, but fortunately, it started to chip away at any ableism she had internalized.

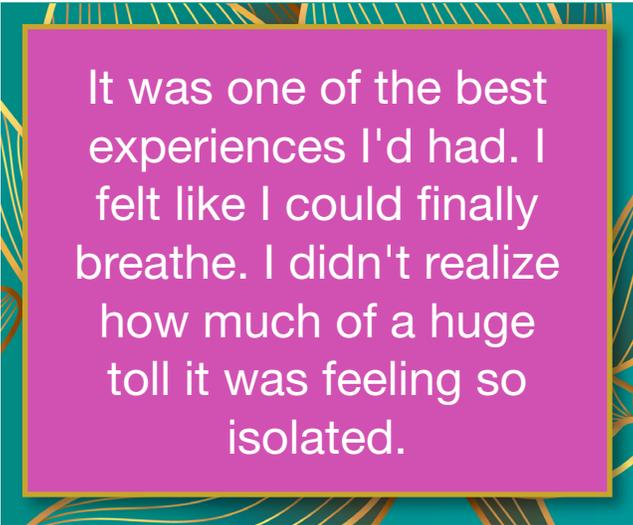
“Before doing my Fulbright research, I couldn’t even look at the word ‘disability’. But I’m growing into my own and becoming more comfortable with my disability, more comfortable with talking about it.”

Since returning to the United States, Istou has been absorbed in all things disability, mining social media,

following disability justice leaders, and watching documentaries like Crip Camp. She’s become more attuned to spaces that could improve on disability inclusion even within the disability space itself. “Having that conversation is what will bring more awareness not just for disabled people, but non-disabled people as well. It’s extremely important that we all understand disability because it’s global. It is very human.”

Her newfound passion extends to the work and research she’s currently doing. Having graduated from John Jay College with a B.A. in Forensic Psychology, she went on to work at a global think tank popularizing prison reform efforts worldwide.

During her time there, she became extremely interested in exploring the under-examined topic of disabled incarcerated people, including those who entered the carceral



It was one of the best experiences I'd had. I felt like I could finally breathe. I didn't realize how much of a huge toll it was feeling so isolated.

system already disabled and those who become disabled while imprisoned. Her findings have added new context to a familiar conclusion: “Culturally and structurally, we weren’t meant to be in these spaces.”

And she still practices yoga.

“Like my Fulbright research exploring ways to combat ableism in personal and political ways, practicing yoga has definitely been the way I’ve personally combatted ableism. It has been liberating in many ways, and I am so grateful that it happened during my Fulbright.” ■

*Note: In order to better serve diverse Fulbrighters and all Fulbright grantees, the Fulbright Program provides an extensive group of online pre-departure resources addressing diversity and inclusion. The Program also provides pre-departure orientation and in-country support to assist Fulbrighters in managing identities abroad.*



## Fulbright Affinity Groups

Inspired by the success of Fulbright Noir to connect and celebrate Fulbright’s Black grantees and alumni over Instagram, additional communities of Fulbrighters have since created identity-based accounts that together form the Fulbright Diversity Collective. While not officially affiliated with or endorsed by the Fulbright Program, the Collective provides platforms for diverse Fulbrighters to share their achievements, stories, and experiences with one another and the broader Fulbright community. From ‘Zines to story spotlights to virtual happy hours, follow these groups on Instagram (and beyond!) to learn more about what they have to offer.



**Fulbright Access** connects Fulbrighters with disabilities to each other and to accessibility resources throughout their Fulbright grant period. @FulbrightAccess



**Fulbright Families** expands knowledge about applying for the Fulbright program and traveling with dependents. @FulbrightFamilies



**Fulbright HBCU** highlights the stories of grantees and alumni who attended HBCUs and increases student participation in the Fulbright Program. @Fulbright.HBCU



**Fulbright LatinX** is an inclusive community that highlights the achievements of LatinX Fulbright scholars and encourages more LatinX scholars to apply for Fulbright. @FulbrightLatinX



**Fulbright Lotus** centers on promoting and supporting Asian Fulbrighters by raising awareness and visibility for issues the community faces. @FulbrightLotus



**Fulbright Noir** is a platform and community of Black Fulbrighters committed to highlighting the experiences and projects of Black grantees within the Fulbright Program. @FulbrightNoir



**Fulbright Prism** empowers LGBTQ Fulbrighters to be “out in the world” by pooling resources, maintaining a networking directory, and planning events. @FulbrightPrism



**Fulbright Salam** showcases the diversity of cultures, interests, and experiences of Muslim Fulbright scholars and educators. @Fulbright.Salam

For more information and examples about Diversity and Inclusion in the Fulbright Program, please see <https://us.fulbrightonline.org/about/diversity-inclusion>

# RETHINKING IDENTITY

## Abroad

"[Going abroad] really made me think about the parts of my identity I choose to identify with."

—Emely Recinos, study abroad alum



As an International Relations major at NYU, there was no question that Emely would study abroad. After all, it was a requirement of the program. She also had already applied for and received a U.S. Department of State-sponsored Benjamin A. Gilman International Scholarship which supports students of limited financial means to study or intern abroad. And given her academic focus on Latin American studies, Buenos Aires - NYU's only site in Latin America - seemed to be the most obvious choice of destination. Or was it?

"I did have a lot of concerns specifically because of my identity as a person with a disability," says Emely, who is visually impaired and uses a white cane to navigate. "Is Buenos Aires a city that is going to be accessible to me? Will I be able to receive materials in braille? Will my professors allow me to submit my assignments over email?" With these concerns in mind, NYU offered Emely the option to instead study at its overseas site in London, perceived to be more readily equipped for disability-related access. Despite the uncertainty, Emely ultimately decided to stick with her original plan to study in Argentina to meet her academic interests. "It was just a matter of how I would make that work for me."

Fortunately Emely didn't have to do that alone. To work through some of her concerns about access abroad, Emely met with NYU's disability specialist who coordinated a fruitful meeting with staff at Argentina's School for the Blind and Visually Impaired. Not only did the school have access to a braille embosser - a machine capable of printing out hard copy braille - that Emely could use if needed, but the staff also assured

Name:

Emely Recinos

Home Institution:

New York University

Major:

International Relations

Programs:

NYU Global Programs;  
Gilman Scholarship  
Program

Destination:

Buenos Aires, Argentina

Emely that they would meet with her professors in Argentina beforehand to share best practices for working with blind students, including equitable treatment. “Unfortunately being treated differently than our non-disabled peers is a common experience for most of us with disabilities, so I wanted to minimize that as much as possible.”

Emely also had pre-arrival chats with her host mother. It was important to Emely that she would be paired with a host family understanding of her disability, respectful of her space, and trusting in her independence. To Emely’s delight and relief, she discovered that her host mother was a bit experienced in this area, having had a blind son-in-law.

Something else was working in Emely’s favor during the pre-arrival conversations: as a native Spanish speaker, she could easily express herself to her host mother and to the overseas staff in their language and describe her concerns about disability access. “Even though some of the staff in Buenos Aires were learning about accommodations for the first time, my ability to communicate with them in Spanish really helped for their understanding.”

But despite all of this careful planning around disability, Emely was completely caught off-guard by local people’s preoccupation and curiosity about a different aspect of her identity.

“One of the most shocking things for me happened the first week I arrived,” Emely laughs. When the host mother’s grandson came over, she introduced Emely as a study abroad student from the United States. Emely could tell by the way the grandson paused that he was confused by what he had just heard. Emely’s host mother explained: “He doesn’t believe that you’re actually from the U.S. because you don’t look like the typical students that came to stay with me before.” Those students were typically blonde, blue-eyed, white. “I don’t look like that at all!” says Emely, who is a Latina with Salvadoran ancestry, “and so he had a hard time believing that I was from the U.S.”

He wasn’t the only one. Throughout her time in Argentina and during side trips to neighboring countries, Emely continued to encounter local people who reacted to Emely’s U.S. nationality with disbelief, assuming she was from anywhere else. She didn’t look like the typical U.S. foreigner, and she spoke Spanish with such a native-level fluency that she didn’t even sound like the typical U.S. foreigner. Trying to explain the nuances of diversity in the United States could sometimes be exhausting and futile, so she experimented with her responses. “Sometimes I’d just say ‘I’m from El Salvador.’ That’s where my family’s from, and no one ever



questioned that! It really made me think about what parts of my identity I choose to identify with.”

Some of the interactions Emely treasured most were the connections she made with local blind students. Their stories underscored how different their higher education experiences had been from her own. For example, Emely’s host institution had been cooperative in arranging disability-related accommodations for a foreign visitor from the United States, but domestic students didn’t have someone who could transcribe for them, nor did they have easy access to audiobooks. “Hearing these issues from the students themselves really stuck with me. To any study abroad student, I would say to go meet local people with similar identities to your own. You’ll gain a better understanding of how local people’s experiences are shaped by the country in which they happen to live.”

Emely returned to New York with a newfound appreciation for what she had available to her in terms of access and independence. Even the subway system, for all of its flaws and accessibility issues, was something she had missed while in Buenos Aires, where taxi fares had added up quickly.

She also brought back ideas for implementing her study abroad follow-on project, a responsibility of all recipients of the U.S. Department of State’s Gilman Scholarship to promote the scholarship to other underrepresented students in study abroad. Her international experience had

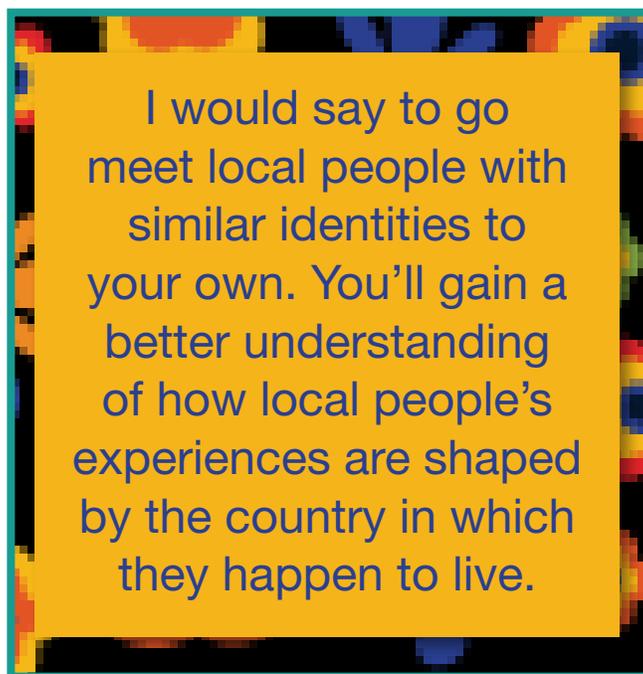
been shaped by multiple facets of her identity, so why not design the follow-on project to do the same?

She wanted the first part of her project to reach students with disabilities. “At NYU, I noticed there is a huge focus on promoting study abroad to people of color and the LGBTQ+ community, but there was no mention of people with disabilities at all. I wanted my university to address that.”

As the co-president of NYU’s Disability Student Union, she teamed up with the Global Programs office to promote and host a panel of international exchange alumni with disabilities who shared their travel experiences and lessons they wanted to share with other disabled students about going abroad, things they wished they had known. The second part of her Gilman follow-on project was focused on engaging the

Latino community and first-generation students, which she did by creating a short video clip about different study abroad scholarships for her church’s website.

Regardless of what community she’s speaking to, Emely would encourage any student to think about themselves holistically in terms of all of their identities before going abroad. “When I was preparing to study abroad, I really only honed in on my disability. I wasn’t thinking about the fact that I was first-generation or Salvadoran. I was so lost in thinking that people would only ask me questions about my blindness that I didn’t think that they would ask me about my experiences in the U.S. as a Latina. I wasn’t ready for people to be interested in those things as well.” ■



# Diversity-Positive Scholarships to Fund Your Experience Abroad

The Gilman Scholarship made it possible for Emely to fund her studies in Argentina, but the opportunity almost slipped through her fingers. “I didn’t even know that there was funding available to do things like study abroad. I found out about the Gilman program just a week before the deadline and had to rush to submit my application.” It made her wonder what other scholarships she might have received if she only knew about them.

Emely suspects that information about study abroad and financial aid is especially slow to reach first-generation American students and first-generation college students like her. “If you don’t have family members who have gone abroad before, you might not know all of the resources available to you.” So take note of the following scholarships; not only can they be applied towards international exchange, they also prioritize students with diverse backgrounds and identities. Just be sure to get those applications in on time!

## **Benjamin A. Gilman Scholarship Program,**

<https://www.gilmanscholarship.org/>

The U.S. Department of State’s Benjamin A. Gilman International Scholarship Program supports U.S. undergraduate students of limited financial means to study or intern abroad. To be eligible for the Gilman Program, applicants must be receiving a Federal Pell Grant during the time of application or provide proof that they will be receiving a Pell Grant during the term of their study. Under the Gilman Program, the John McCain International Scholarship for Children of Military Families supports U.S. undergraduate students who are children of active duty military personnel and receive any type of federal title IV funding, to study or intern abroad.

## **Fund for Education Abroad,**

[www.fundforeducationabroad.org](http://www.fundforeducationabroad.org)

The Fund for Education Abroad’s general scholarships are awarded to students of color, community college students, and first-generation college students. In addition, all applicants are automatically considered for any number of specialized scholarships for which they are eligible, including the Rainbow Scholarship for LGBTQI students, the Tamara H. Bryant Memorial Scholarship for African-American students, and more.

## **IES Abroad Diversity Scholarships & Grants,**

[www.iesabroad.org/scholarships-aid](http://www.iesabroad.org/scholarships-aid)

Many study abroad providers award scholarships to students who participate in their programs, including students who have historically been underrepresented in study abroad. For example, IES Abroad offers a variety of diversity-focused funding such as scholarships open to students attending Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) or

Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) as well as Disability Grants awarded to students who have disability-related expenses.

## **Frederick Douglass Global Fellowship,**

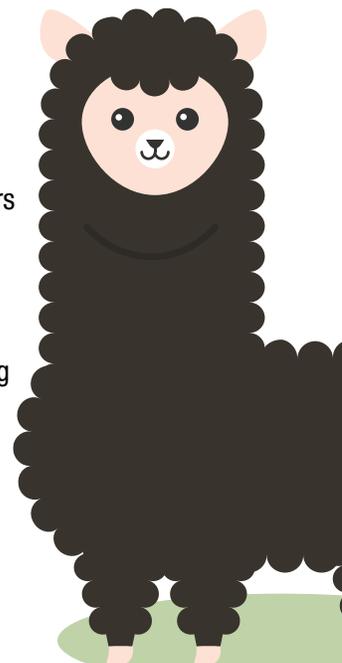
[www.ciee.org/go-abroad/college-study-abroad/scholarships/frederick-douglass-global-fellowship](http://www.ciee.org/go-abroad/college-study-abroad/scholarships/frederick-douglass-global-fellowship)

Offered by The Council on International Educational Exchange (CIEE), another study abroad provider, the Frederick Douglass Global Fellowship is a fully-funded summer study abroad program open to students of color from Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs). Only 10 students are accepted per cohort, making this a highly competitive opportunity. However, eligible students who apply but are not selected may be able to receive a Frederick Douglass Summer Scholars Grant toward any CIEE summer program.

## **Diversity Abroad Overseas Ambassador,**

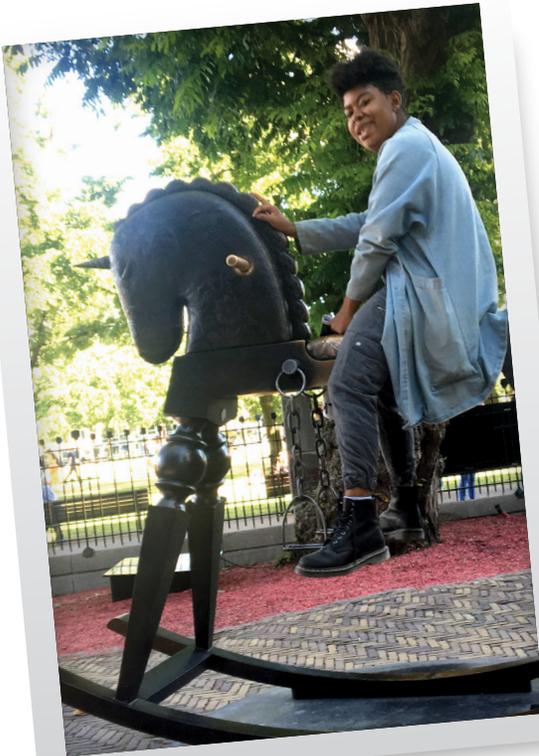
[www.diversityabroad.com/overseas-ambassador](http://www.diversityabroad.com/overseas-ambassador)

Calling all influencers! For creative travelers who plan to document their study, intern, volunteer, or teach abroad experience, Diversity Abroad offers \$500 scholarships to student correspondents tasked with writing articles, making videos, and sharing photos from their travels to motivate other diverse students to go abroad. Economically disadvantaged students, first-generation, students with disabilities and ethnic and racially diverse students are strongly encouraged to apply.





# REFLECTIONS *on the Canal*



“Getting ‘the most’ out of an experience can look like so many different things.”

—Gillian Giles, study abroad alum

As Gillian Giles sketches a tree in the backyard of their family's Chicago home or contemplates which types of plants native to Illinois will attract pollinators to their planned butterfly garden, you would likely sense that Gillian is one of those old souls who can slow down and appreciate life at a more relaxed pace, someone adept at savoring moments of quiet amid the buzz of the city.

But slowing down is harder than it sounds. It's a skill that takes practice and patience, all the more so when you're a college student with a sense of adventure and a passport, as Gillian can attest.

Gillian only had six weeks in Amsterdam that summer before their final year at Sarah Lawrence College. But after years of awaiting their first-ever international travel experience, and with the looming sense that the window of opportunity to travel so freely would close upon graduation, they were eager to make those six weeks count.

“The thing about study abroad is it's so compact. You have a short amount of time and you're expected to do a lot. You're expected to be able to adjust quickly, to explore the city, to participate in physically demanding walking tours. You're encouraged to travel all over. All while studying in an academically rigorous program.”

Gillian often questioned whether they were making full use out of the precious little time they had abroad. It wasn't enough to stay in Amsterdam; they'd miss out on other Dutch cities. It wasn't enough to stay in the Netherlands; they'd miss out on other destinations throughout Europe. For six weeks, Gillian was often on the move, making trips to Delft, Haarlem, Berlin, London.

Name:

Gillian Giles

Home Institution:

Sarah Lawrence College

Major:

Sociology

Programs:

IES Abroad

Destination:

Amsterdam, Netherlands

But at some point, it had to be enough.

Gillian had to set some boundaries for the sake of their physical and mental health. Otherwise overexertion and fatigue could trigger flare-ups of myasthenia gravis, a chronic condition. To quell their anxiety (and their family's), Gillian got a medical bracelet and found a doctor in Amsterdam who could help if need be. As an accommodation for ADHD and mental health issues, IES arranged for Gillian to receive extended time on tests and assignments, which was helpful. But for the most part, the best course of action was inaction.

“Self-care meant not doing some things. It meant hanging back sometimes and really being cognizant of my limits. It meant going to sleep a little bit earlier than other folks at times.”

Of course there are times when Gillian wishes that they had somehow squeezed even more out of their six weeks abroad. But overall, those six weeks abroad instilled in Gillian a greater appreciation of simply being instead of doing.

“Exploring the city does not mean overexerting yourself. Sometimes it's as simple as walking down to the canals just to sit and look at boats, or going up to the roof to take in the scenery. Or making the time to be with people you have met there, to enjoy their company and get to know them. Getting ‘the most’ out of an experience can look like so many different things.”

### “The exchange program and my identity intersected.”

For Gillian, the study abroad course on “Society, Culture & Gender in Amsterdam” offered through IES Abroad was the right fit, both academically and personally. Throughout college, they had been layering their studies in sociology with the interdisciplinary lenses of gender, sex and sexuality. The IES program in Amsterdam seemed to be one of the few international exchange programs exploring those themes. Gillian also identifies as a queer person and was drawn to Amsterdam's reputation of being very progressive and LGBTQ friendly.

Gillian is a queer person, but they are also a queer person of color, a community known as QPOC or QTPOC to include transgender people of color. With this convergence of identities, Gillian is as attuned to the social dynamics of power and race as they are to those of gender and sexuality. When Gillian applied this lens to their observations and



interactions in Amsterdam, the city's glittering facade of a tolerant, progressive world destination began to tarnish.

Gillian began to notice Amsterdam's anti-black treatment of its black residents, and especially immigrants or descendants of immigrants from Morocco, Nigeria, Suriname and throughout the African diaspora. They recall one particularly unnerving yet revealing experience sitting down at an otherwise empty local café in their host neighborhood. As Gillian scanned the menu, the staff had stared at Gillian icily, suspiciously, even aggressively... that is, until they heard Gillian speak.

"Once they could tell I was American, their tone changed immediately. They could tell I wasn't a local, that I was a tourist. That distinction was different from anything I had personally experienced in the United States. I had to learn that one of the biggest identifiers for me next to race was also nationality."

In contrast with experiences laden by anti-blackness, Gillian's spirit was buoyed by at least two identity-affirming events during their travels that held space for Black joy, celebration, and community that heightened their sense of pan-African solidarity.

One was the Surinamese Independence Day Festival held in Amsterdam. "Keti Koti," a phrase meaning "Broken Chains," observes the end of Dutch colonization in Suriname. Gillian joined in on the festivities alongside Amsterdam's large community of Afro-Surinamese residents, many of whom arrived in the city after independence.

And perhaps Gillian's most cherished experience during their time abroad was attending Pride in London as well as UK Black Pride, which is Europe's largest celebration for African, Asian, Middle Eastern, Latin American and Caribbean-heritage LGBTQI+ people.

"I have never been around so many people who share a similar identity to me. There was so much joy and love in that."

## Post-Trip Unpacking

After returning home, Gillian continued to reflect on their layers of identity in the context of their experiences abroad and in the United States.

"I'm much more cognizant of folks who are immigrants and who are undocumented and are of different



nationalities and the different privileges they carry. I really had to think past my own oppression in the United States.”

Gillian also recognizes how financial privilege literally afforded them the opportunity to go abroad:

"I was pretty privileged in my experience. I was able to go because I am an upper middle-class black person and I had the family support and money to go. A lot of black people, a lot of people of color do not. Financially it's hard for folks to go on study abroad, and that's a barrier in access."

Other barriers to study abroad access which Gillian would like international educators to consider are those which impact students with disabilities, whether it's identifying accessible housing and tours by bus to reduce the physically demanding aspects of travel, or whether it's identifying mentors and networks of mental health support for students who might otherwise feel isolated away from their usual support networks.

"I think that seeing things outside of your own context gives you the ability to dream. Amsterdam helped me with that; I was able to dream of more spaces that were inclusive of me."

After spending time with family and volunteering in mutual aid projects in Chicago, Gillian plans to embark on their next overseas journey in Morocco. No doubt the trip will serve yet another set of infinite possibilities for Gillian to explore not just the sites but also their identity and context in the world. And they might find a still moment to sit and sketch. ■



## Gillian's tips for maintaining your brain while abroad

### 1. Try not to judge yourself or compare yourself to others on the trip.

"It can be easy to look at the experiences of your friends who have gone abroad or the people in your program and feel as though you're not doing enough. That's why it's important to ground yourself and your expectations. Your study abroad experience is unique to you and will not look like anyone else's, even if you're on the same program. If you find yourself judging yourself while abroad, check your expectations and judgement, and challenge them."

### 2. Challenge your negative thoughts with new experiences.

"Negative thoughts happen to everyone. If you start to experience negative thoughts, pay attention to your environment. Being present and mindful of what's around you makes you less focused on what's happening in your head. New experiences are a great way to refocus that attention, and while abroad you will have a lot of them! To refocus your attention and ground yourself, try something new, such as going out to a new place with friends, visiting attractions, or simply exploring your area. Alternatively, checking out local cafes and parks or just getting out, even if it's on your own, can help challenge negative thoughts."

### 3. Seek support.

"Sometimes there are times when you need to reach out to others for help and support. In addition to your home support of family, friends, and partners, you can also build a support system of friends while abroad as you are all going through the same wonderful and challenging experiences and can relate to each other. Sharing your thoughts and feelings can be hard yet helpful, as others can provide good insight and contextualize your feelings and experiences. This can, in turn, make coping with hard experiences easier. If necessary, reach out for further support from the program staff or a therapist. Do not be afraid to reach out and ask for what you need!"

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*Adapted and reprinted from "Mental Health Matters: Maintaining Your Brain While Abroad," by Gillian Giles for the IES Abroad blog at [iesabroad.org/blogs](http://iesabroad.org/blogs)*

# THE GREATEST GIFT



"When you immerse yourself in a new environment, you are not supposed to know every single outcome."

—David Sharif, study abroad alum

Global citizenship is everything to David Shapiro Sharif's family, and it has led him to all of his worldwide expeditions, spanning 40 countries across five continents. "My dad gave me the idea to become an independent world traveler. He told me, 'You are very fortunate, and you have to make the most of every upcoming opportunity.'" David took his father's advice to heart, including throughout his education.

A Magna Cum Laude graduate of Pace University with a degree in Political Science & Peace Justice Studies, David spent almost as much time studying in other countries as he did at his local institution! He enrolled in programs with the American Institute for Foreign Studies (AIFS) in Quito, Ecuador; Barcelona, Spain; and Berlin, Germany. He also participated in a Global Challenges course in Geneva, Switzerland and acted as a delegate at a Model United Nations conference in Rome, Italy.

Prior to his first study abroad experience in Ecuador and the Galapagos Islands, David had serious doubts about how the trip would go. To calm his nerves, David's family and friends encouraged him to appreciate what he could potentially gain. Towards the end of his encounters, he reflected on what he acquired: living with a host family for the first time, conversing in Spanish, and passing a course on Ecosystems & Biodiversity at another university... not to mention irreplaceable memories of climbing rocky cliffs, savoring the views of the open sea, and mimicking the sounds of sea lions.

**Name:**

**David Sharif**

**Home Institution:**

**Pace University**

**Major:**

**Political Science**

**Programs:**

**AIFS Study Abroad**

**Destination:**

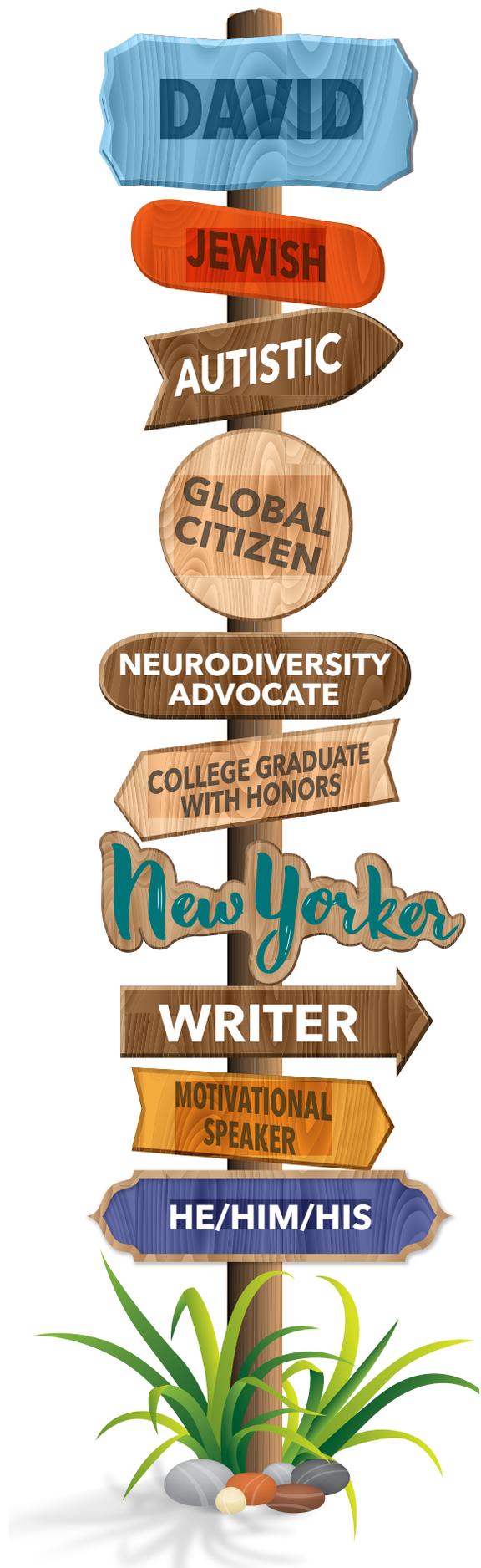
**Berlin, Germany;  
Quito, Ecuador;  
Barcelona, Spain**

As a visual learner, David is drawn to the images, diagrams, shapes and designs he observes at art exhibits, religious memorials, and other structures. Those visuals often stir up strong feelings. In Spain, David was captivated by the architecture of Sagrada Familia and Park Guell, whose colorful stones and windows resembled the bricks he used to play with as a kid. He also noted some peculiar visual differences in European cities in contrast to his life in New York: buildings constructed like the letter L, street names affixed to the brick walls as opposed to the traffic light poles, and intersections shaped like a stop sign.

Other times, the feelings stirred up by visual imagery are more somber and solemn. In Germany, David visited Jewish museums and concentration camps, where the sight of anti-Semitic imagery would make him clench his fists as he looked for clues about how the Holocaust began during World War II. "Germany was a very touching experience for me. My responsibility was to keep my emotions intact. In my opinion, Jewish history is all about taking the lessons that leave a significant influence regardless of how I perceive it."

In addition to visiting monuments significant to Jewish history, David finds small ways to honor his own Jewish heritage and traditions while traveling internationally, whether it's bringing along a yarmulke in his luggage or preparing a modest Shabbat dinner for himself on Friday nights (that is, when he can locate a good loaf of challah bread and a glass of grape juice in the host community!) In fact, it was David's Jewish identity which provided a gateway to his first independent travel experience abroad, a one month trip to Israel with fellow Jewish youth from Camp Havaya in the summer before his junior year of high school.

In addition to backtracking his Jewish background, David is proud of his autistic



“For me, traveling is the gift of my dreams. It is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity that will lead to friendships, fond memories, and being challenged to look at the bigger picture of my inner-self.”

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identity and appreciates the ways in which this aspect of himself has added a unique lens to his travels. He is never afraid to show who he is as a person and what he is capable of.

"I am a neurodiverse man with the desire to learn whatever is being passed down. I will always have a way to navigate myself, no matter how long it will take me to feel accustomed to the cultural practices."

Traveling also enhanced David's independence. The everyday tasks of shopping for groceries and cooking in another country sharpened his skills of living in another home. His heightened sense of direction made him feel like a seasoned world citizen.

David wants autistic students to know that travel is meant to be unpredictable. "When you immerse yourself in a new environment, you are not supposed to know every single outcome. Fear will make you waste everything you've worked so hard for. Striving with courage is how you persevere."

To balance the uncertainty of travel, David tirelessly advocated for his academic accommodations to be in place. In college, David had access to comprehensive support services like academic coaches, personalized study plans, campus life coordinators, and extended time for exams. Although he knew the programs wouldn't be able to replicate all of those services abroad, he negotiated several helpful methods to support his needs:

In Ecuador, the Resident Director arranged critical lecture notes out of the PowerPoint slides.

In Spain and Germany, David requested tutors with extensive knowledge of the education systems who could help him adapt to new grading scales, interpret the expectations, and read between the lines of his projects.

Going to Italy for Model United Nations, the Political Science Department was able to budget one of David's academic coaches to travel and provide guidance as needed.

David recommends that students discuss their accommodations and the course requirements with the programs early on in the study abroad application process. "Give directors ample time to go over your needs. It will allow them to determine what is best to help you feel comfortable with the workload. You have to communicate directly on how you learn."

David values the connections he's formed with the autism community, most recently serving as a community moderator for the Global Autism Project. He especially admires popular autistic leaders who share their stories through public speaking, books, poetry, and he aims to follow in their footsteps. David's dream career is to be a global professional speaker giving talks about autism and contributing to the Jewish community on religious education. But whatever his future may hold, David will find ways to build on his self-advocacy. Especially if those pathways involve a passport.

“For me, traveling is the gift of my dreams. It is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity that will lead to friendships, fond memories, and being challenged to look at the bigger picture of my inner-self.” ■

# David's Travel Essentials

## Mapping:

Depending on where he's going, David generally downloads the map of the city's metro system and notes the stops from his residence, school, and study abroad office. "As it becomes familiar, I can get around without having a map in front of my face."

## Money management:

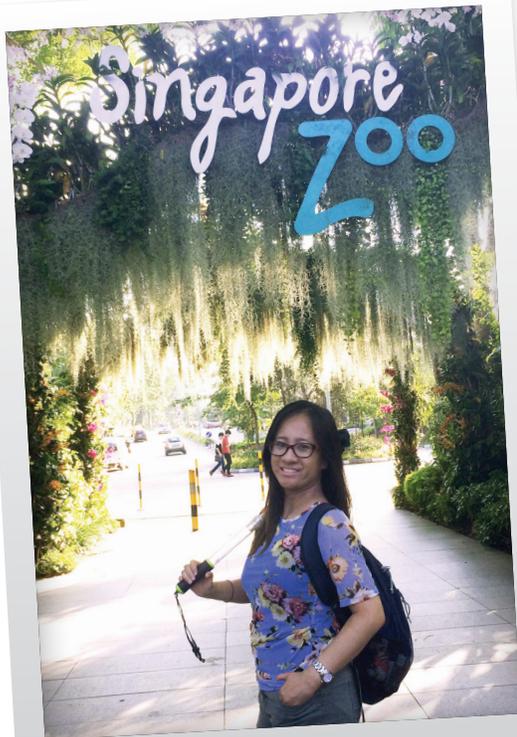
David uses the GlobeConvert app for converting currency in foreign countries and keeping track of his expenses. No Wi-Fi required!

## Community-based travel:

Consider an international exchange experience with travelers who share a common identity. David's first taste of independent travel was a trip to Israel with the No'ar Hadash Israel Experience for Jewish teens, organized through Camp Havaya (<https://havayaisrael.org>). David also plans to travel abroad through the Global Autism Project, which runs a SkillCorps® program (<https://skillcorps.globalautismproject.org>) for autism self-advocates, professionals, and parents to travel to partner centers in 11 countries around the world.



# LOOKING EASTWARD *to Look Inward*



"I really wanted more to understand who I was. I thought going abroad would help me do that."

—Geraldine Dang, study abroad alum

If food plays a valuable role in our ability to appreciate and connect with our cultural heritage, it's no surprise that traveling to one of the top food capitals of the world would usher Geraldine Dang along her delicious path to self-discovery, eating her way through Singapore's world-class restaurants with friends and joining co-workers for lunch at one of the city's vast hubs of stalls hawking aromatic noodles and savory skewered snacks.

Asian cuisine had always been Geraldine's closest connection to her heritage. "When I was young, I lacked much connection to my Asian culture, pride and identity. I only got intrigued by Asian food."

Growing up in Texas with Vietnamese parents who immigrated from England, Geraldine and her family lived in a community with very few other Asian residents. Although her parents both speak Vietnamese, her family made a decision not to teach Geraldine Vietnamese, wanting her to focus on a strong English and sign language base, which they believed would set her up for success in college.

Geraldine is Deaf but did not grow up with ASL. As a kid in school, she was taught to use a form of sign language designed to follow the structure of spoken English. This is distinct from American Sign Language, which has its own unique grammar structure and is widely used among members of the Deaf community. As the only deaf person in a hearing family, Geraldine taught her younger sister to sign, and her parents learned a bit as well, but by and large, Geraldine had just as many connections to the Deaf community as she did to an Asian community (which is to say, none whatsoever).

**Name:**

Geraldine Dang

**Home Institution:**

Rochester Institute of Technology - National Technical Institute for the Deaf

**Major:**

3D Digital Design

**Programs:**

RIT Global; Gilman Scholarship Program

**Destination:**

Tokyo, Japan; Singapore

That all changed when she arrived at Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT) in New York. With RIT's diverse student body, Geraldine met students with origins or ancestry from Cambodia, Vietnam, and other countries throughout Asia. Geraldine found in RIT's National Technical Institute for the Deaf a gateway to explore her Deaf identity as well, and for the first time, she began to learn ASL. "When I sign, it's like my hands start speaking."

It wasn't long before Geraldine found ways to explore both of these identities together. She joined RIT's Asian Deaf Club and jumped at the chance to participate in RIT's Deaf-led study abroad program in Japan designed for Deaf students, signing hearing students, sign language interpreters, and faculty. "I really wanted more to understand who I was. I thought going abroad would help me do that."

Geraldine remembers the shock of arriving at the airport in Japan. "I was so excited to finally be there. Looking around the airport, it was the first time I'd ever seen so many Asian people all in one place. I was not used to it! It finally hit me that there is a whole country full of people who look like me, and it took me a few days to adjust to that realization."

"Looking the part" was a double-edged sword for Geraldine. Despite the exhilaration of this new experience, she felt some disappointment that perhaps she blended in too well to her Japanese hosts, who were more curious and excited to meet other members of the diverse group of Americans, which included Asian, Black, Latino, White and LGBT travelers. "There was a lot of interest towards the other students, which I understand, but they didn't really see me as something 'new.' They saw me as the same as them."

Despite this, Geraldine kept an open mind and embraced as much as she could. She began taking in what she was seeing and made new friends, ate their food, traveled on their transportation, and saw people use Japanese Sign Language.

"Japan really opened up my world," says Geraldine, whose group relished opportunities to meet Japan's Deaf community, including students, professionals, and even Geraldine's longtime pen pal! "When we were finally able to meet in person, it was so powerful. The Deaf Japanese welcomed the Americans with open arms, and it felt like we had an amazing sense of community. It made me want to learn more and travel throughout Asia further."

She'd later have her chance during her search for an internship placement. It hadn't initially occurred to Geraldine to intern abroad. "I was actually looking for an internship in the United States, but it was hard to find one. To my surprise, my family suggested I go work in Singapore! I thought, 'why not try?'"

In traveling to Singapore, Geraldine would be following in the footsteps of her paternal grandfather, who worked as a





diplomat and traveled to several countries throughout his career. "When my parents told me that he had been to Singapore, I had no idea! I asked them to share some stories and pictures with me about what he had seen, where he had been, so that I could experience what he had."

Geraldine applied for and received a U.S. Department of State-sponsored Benjamin A. Gilman International scholarship to fund her internship abroad for a full summer. She knew it would be challenging to travel alone to work in another country she didn't know much about, but she resolved to do as much traveling while abroad. "I used to travel with my family and friends for many years. Stepping out of my comfort zone was the biggest challenge for me, but it's where I thrived!"

While Singapore is a multicultural country made up of Chinese, Malay, Indian and various other ethnicities, Geraldine once again felt a sense of awe, being around so many Asian people who looked like her. "I should've been used to it after having been to Japan!"

Geraldine's 8-week internship took place at a consulting firm specializing in UX (user experience) design. She gained a new skill redesigning websites, but she also got a crash course in studying Southeast Asian business relations. "It's very different from American business in terms of competition and how you manage relationships."

There's so much to learn about a culture through the workplace, and Geraldine found lunchtime to be an educational daily ritual. At their small office, everyone would go out to lunch together to eat as a group, boss included. This usually took place at the hawker center where Geraldine's office mates would quickly choose their meal from rows of food stalls and meet back with the group. "It was expected that we wouldn't start eating until the senior staff arrived, so it felt very hierarchical. And each time there was also always a bit of back-and-forth about who was going to pay the bill."

Almost all of Geraldine's coworkers were Asians from Singapore or Malaysia, but she was the

only Deaf employee. At Geraldine's request, RIT had arranged for two sign language interpreters to travel from the United States to Singapore. The interpreters helped facilitate communication between Geraldine and her internship supervisor, who was understanding and open to the learning experience of hosting the company's first Deaf intern. "I didn't feel like there were many barriers, other than the fact that my American interpreters sometimes had a hard time understanding the British accent of my coworkers, and vice versa." Outside of work, when Geraldine and the interpreting team went their separate ways, Geraldine relied on her hearing aids and phone to communicate back and forth with hearing people, which she reports worked well.

Geraldine sought out opportunities to meet Deaf people in Singapore too, making initial connections through friends who had traveled there. "Once I got there, it was very easy to meet deaf Singaporeans quite quickly, and they were willing to introduce me to others."

In Singapore, Geraldine observed that the sign language has a strict English language order as well as some Chinese and Asian influences. Still, she remained unfazed and relished gaining exposure to Japanese Sign Language, Singapore Sign Language, International Sign Language, and British Sign Language during her time abroad.

Whatever challenges in communication may have taken place were always overshadowed by the warmth and hospitality of Geraldine's new friends. They'd meet at cafes after work or go exploring on weekends. Geraldine has some especially delicious memories of venturing out to some of Singapore's world-class restaurants and food stalls with Deaf friends visiting from neighboring Malaysia. "I felt really touched to have had a chance to meet them. It felt like we had developed a really strong bond by the end of the program."

Geraldine also developed a stronger connection to her family history. Her family arrived in Singapore for a few days and Geraldine enjoyed showing them around. Together they visited areas and buildings where her grandfather had worked or taken photos. "Now that I have the memories of traveling to the places in Singapore

where my grandfather had been, the stories about him have become more real.”

Geraldine reflected on growing up living far from family spread all over the world. Most of her father’s family and mother’s family lived in Europe, while a few lived in Asia, others in Canada and the United States. Most of her family spoke English, a few spoke Vietnamese and French, and Geraldine of course is a signer of American Sign Language. Growing up, this sense of family spread made her feel distanced from her heritage, but now, having traveled to so many places in the world herself, she feels as though she is upholding a proud family tradition.

“Yes, my family was spread out, but that actually gave me more inspiration to travel myself, because they have done that. I had a diplomat grandfather who traveled all over the place, so traveling is like my family heritage. I believe that my grandfather’s spirit is in the next generation with me and with future generations as we travel the world like him.”

Since graduating from RIT with a bachelor’s degree in 3D Digital Design, Geraldine transitioned to graduate studies at University of California Santa Cruz Silicon Valley Extension where she’s applying her suite of skills - graphic design, video editing, and 3D design - to a number of projects, including an animation project for a school and a story-telling video for foodies. While working towards her certification in UX/UI web design, no doubt building off the skills she gained during her overseas internship, she is especially mindful as a disabled person, as a deaf person, how accessibility is at the root of good design. She’s creating a phone app for deaf-blind people to navigate spaces - influenced by her RIT friends who have Usher Syndrome - and the virtual courses she’s taking have enhanced her understanding of communication skills among people with disabilities in virtual environments.

And although she doesn’t yet know where she will travel next (and what foods she will eat during those travels!), she continues to explore and find confidence and self-acceptance in her Asian identity.

“I am still learning about my Asian identity. I am an Asian-American, with a disability and a British connection. The term ‘Asian-American’ felt like

such a general concept until I traveled to new countries and learned to accept who and what I am through my own eyes. The process was difficult, and I still don’t know everything. I am still growing, but I think that learning about my identities helped me feel more confident in myself.” ■



# FINDING STRENGTH

## *in Identity*



**Name:**  
Johileny Merán

**Home Institution:**  
New York University

**Major:**  
Global Public Health,  
Sociology, Disability  
Studies

**Programs:**  
NYU Global Programs

**Destination:**  
London, England

### “What about disability?”

*-Johileny Merán, study abroad alum*

As Johileny Merán made the final preparations for her studies abroad in London the fall semester of her senior year, it was a question which weighed heavily on her mind. Like many of her peers as a freshman at New York University, she had attended all of the study abroad program events to gather study abroad information, but she always seemed to leave the events with that same question.

But it’s not the only question that lingers when it comes to navigating her multilayered identity. In fact, Johileny identifies as a disabled Afrolatina, Dominican immigrant, a first generation college graduate, and ESL student with a low-income background.

“When I roll into a room in my wheelchair, I’ve always wondered what it is that people see. Is it the wheels I use to navigate? The color of my skin? My gender? Do they know that I am a first generation college graduate? That I lived in a homeless shelter for most of my high school career? Probably not.”

Johileny has attended many study abroad information sessions, including sessions tailored for students of color, first generation students, students with low-income backgrounds. But each time, she still left with the same question:

“What about disability access abroad?”

Johileny knew that she’d need some answers to this question and more in order to make an informed decision about where to study abroad, especially knowing that the need for financial aid and support tend to go hand in hand with the expenses of navigating an inaccessible society.

“The little things I do to navigate inaccessibility add up. Would there be accessible public transportation, and if

not, could I afford to take a cab? Would I be able to have my groceries delivered at least once a month (because carrying groceries while maneuvering my manual wheelchair is difficult)? If so, how much would this cost? These were some questions I struggled with.”

As an immigrant from the Dominican Republic, Johileny took a cautious approach to choosing a program location because she was aware that disability rights and accessibility differs from one country to another. She ultimately selected London, optimistic that it might offer a level of accessibility that sought in her experience.

“It was important that I not only study at my abroad site, but that I would be able to explore and enjoy myself independently.”

To achieve this level of independence, Johileny took the initiative to broach her questions about disability access with key staff on her campus, starting with her campus disability specialist to discuss possible disability-related accommodations, strategies for getting around abroad, and how these might look different overseas than at home. Johileny went over the program schedule with the study abroad staff to plan ahead for the social activities and field trips, and the program arranged to pay any cab fare that she’d need to get herself to those locations. She also met regularly with a point person in London who had experience supporting other students with physical disabilities, and arrived in London a week early so she could familiarize herself with navigating the city.

In retrospect, Johileny now knows that there could have been more ways to prepare.

“I wish I had had a conversation about my medical insurance abroad. When one of my front wheels popped off my wheelchair in the middle of the street, I was scared, especially when I found out my insurance wouldn’t cover it. At one point my wheelchair’s power assist stopped working, which made it harder to get to class. I was disappointed, but I still worked through the experiences.”

It was also while abroad that Johileny learned the extent to which different layers of identity are inextricably linked together, and one event in particular stands out in her memory.

Johileny had taken a weekend jaunt from London to Barcelona with several friends, and the group decided to take in the sights of Barcelona by tour bus. Things started out smoothly enough; the bus had a ramp, and so Johileny easily boarded the bus without having to leave her manual



“ Yes, I experienced challenges, but it was amazing. When I advocated for myself abroad, I embraced all of my identities together to be my biggest strength.”



wheelchair, but she switched to her forearm crutches in order to follow her friends up the steps to the open-air level of the bus.

It's a misconception that people with physical disabilities all use wheelchairs 100% of the time, and unfortunately the tour bus driver clung to this misconception stubbornly, refusing to deploy the wheelchair ramp when the group was ready to exit at their stop. From the driver's view, if Johileny could make it up and down to the second level of the bus without the ramp, she surely didn't need him to lower the ramp. When Johileny tried to explain that the ramp was indeed necessary, the driver then claimed that the ramp was out of order and started to utter a racially charged comment in Spanish, not realizing that Spanish is Johileny's first language.

“It became clear to me as an Afrolatina woman that this wasn't just about ableism; this was compounded by racism and sexism.”

Johileny stood her ground, and after arguing her side - this time in Spanish - the driver finally relented and deployed the ramp so Johileny could deboard. Although shaken, the group went about their exploration of the city. Reflecting on that brief but frustrating

encounter led Johileny to a surprising realization that would serve her long afterwards.

“Overall, my Barcelona trip during my study abroad program was my favorite. Yes, I experienced challenges, but it was amazing. When I advocated for myself abroad, I embraced all of my identities together to be my biggest strength.”

To apply this lesson going forward, Johileny encourages international educators to remember that many students experience many different layers of identity, not all of them apparent. Furthermore, these study abroad advisors should incorporate disability into their diversity initiatives and in all international exchange activities. She hopes that in doing so, other students with disabilities will be emboldened to explore opportunities abroad.

“Everyday I learn more about how my perceived identities dictate the way I experience the world.” ■

*Johileny Merán is a Project Coordinator at Mobility International USA, where she supports the U.S. Department of State-sponsored project the National Clearinghouse on Disability and Exchange.*

# Identity Reflection Activity for Travelers

In this issue of the *AWAY*, you've read stories illustrating the important role that identity plays in international exchange experiences. Now it's your turn! Use this worksheet to reflect on your own layers of identity and how they might impact - and even enhance - your future travels abroad.

**Here's how:** For this exercise, select the aspect of your identity with which you most associate each statement, or feel free to select more than one! Space "H" is left blank in case you'd like to add in another identity category that isn't already listed.

**I am most proud of this part of my identity**

A    B    C    D    E    F    G    H

**I am most aware of this part of my identity**

A    B    C    D    E    F    G    H

**I wonder how this part of my identity might impact my relationship with the host community**

A    B    C    D    E    F    G    H

**I don't often think about this part of my identity**

A    B    C    D    E    F    G    H

**I sometimes worry about how this part of my identity might impact my relationship with other students**

A    B    C    D    E    F    G    H

**I sometimes worry about how this part of my identity might impact my relationship with the host community**

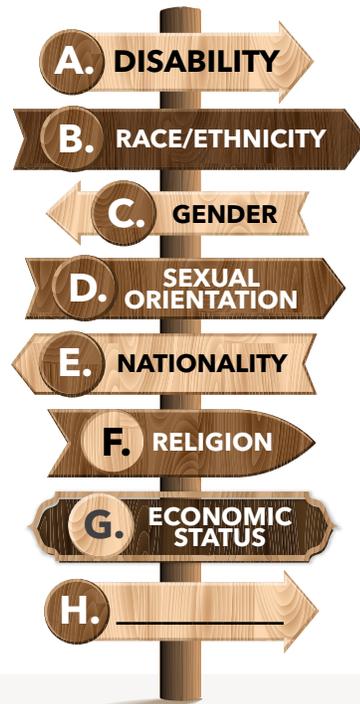
A    B    C    D    E    F    G    H

**While traveling, this part of my identity feels really important to me**

A    B    C    D    E    F    G    H

**I want to learn more about this part of my identity**

A    B    C    D    E    F    G    H



**What was interesting about this exercise?**

**What was challenging?**

As you reflect on your identities, what kind of additional information, resources, and preparation might you need before going abroad?

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Try using this self-reflection tool multiple times throughout your international exchange journey; your responses may change over time!

*This worksheet was adapted with permission from Seattle University's Education Abroad Office*

# Community Conversations

Tune into one of these captioned, ASL-interpreted webinars presented by the National Clearinghouse on Disability and Exchange, featuring international exchange alumni with disabilities who tell their traveler stories through the lens of identity and intersectionality.

## Disability and Identity Abroad

Presented as part of the 2021 Joining Hands Virtual Symposium, a panel of international exchange alumni brought the topic of disability to the forefront of their conversation, sharing how people with disabilities also hold other identities that may impact their exchange.



## Black Disabled People Abroad

For Black History Month 2021, the National Clearinghouse on Disability and Exchange invited a panel of black, disabled international exchange alumni to share their international exchange experiences and offer considerations to educators when planning for access and inclusion to students from dually marginalized identities. Their stories impact future access and inclusion planning for international exchange practitioners and empower more black, disabled students to take their rightful place in international exchange.



## Disability and Intersectionality

A panel of international exchange alumni with disabilities and other diverse identities reflect on their experiences abroad, touching on the dynamics and interplay of disability, nationality, race, ethnicity, gender, cultural heritage, and more. Presented as part of the 2020 Joining Hands Virtual Symposium.



Find these and more videos on MIUSA's YouTube Channel, @miusa1981





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