

# A World Awaits You

A Publication of the National Clearinghouse on Disability and Exchange

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## Anniversary Issue

30 Years of the National Clearinghouse on Disability and Exchange



# MESSAGE FROM SUSAN SYGALL

MIUSA Co-Founder and CEO

It is with great pride that I write this message in celebration of the 30-year anniversary of MIUSA's National Clearinghouse on Disability and Exchange.

I remember the joy I felt when I accepted a scholarship to spend a year in Australia as a Rotary Global Graduate Fellow, and as one of the first wheelchair riders to begin exploring the world of international exchange. Living in another country, studying in Australia, and later traveling by bus through Asia, was one of the most transformational years of my life.

Nonetheless, all through that experience, I couldn't stop asking myself: where are all the disabled people? Why are we not becoming citizen diplomats at the same rate as non-disabled people? I made myself a promise: when I returned from my travels, I would create an organization to enable people with all types of disabilities, from all over the world, to have the same international opportunities as non-disabled people.

Returning to the U.S., I surveyed disabled people and study abroad professionals. I learned that, unlike their non-disabled peers, people with disabilities – youth, college students, professionals – did not even know that they could dream of international exchange. While other students were encouraged by parents, educators, or peers to apply for high school exchange programs, semesters abroad, international fellowships, language schools or global volunteer programs,



Susan Sygall

disabled students had no idea that these could be their dreams, too. Meanwhile, most international exchange providers also did not know that studying, volunteering, and traveling abroad was possible for people with disabilities.

Without information, images, or role models, it was hard to imagine, for example, a quadriplegic Peace Corps volunteer in Paraguay, a blind exchange high school student in Bosnia, a Deaf Fulbright scholar in Italy, or two paraplegics strapping backpacks on their wheelchairs and traveling across Asia. And if they did dare to imagine, neither disabled people nor exchange professionals seemed to know how to make these scenarios a reality.

That is why Mobility International USA (MIUSA) was born. I co-created MIUSA with the explicit mission of empowering people with disabilities to participate in and lead international exchange. For more than a decade, MIUSA pioneered cross-disability exchange programs, produced tipsheets, shared success stories, and advised a growing number of international organizations who were seeking to expand participation of disabled participants.

**“ I would create an organization to enable people with all types of disabilities, from all over the world, to have the same international opportunities as non-disabled people. ”**

As word grew, so did demand. It became clear that we needed to scale up, to create a central “clearinghouse”, where people with disabilities and international exchange providers could find information and services that would make international exchange accessible.

And then, I met Pat Wright, a renowned political strategist. Pat believed as much as I did in the power of disability leadership and international exchange. Together, we worked with leaders in Congress and the Department of State, and with their support launched the National Clearinghouse on Disability and Exchange (NCDE).

Thirty years later: MIUSA and the NCDE have profoundly changed the face of international exchange. Today, thousands of disabled people of all ages seek out every type of international exchange opportunity, and exchange programs today overwhelmingly embrace people with disabilities as an integral part of who they serve.

And what a huge impact that has had in the world!

As you will read in this celebration of 30 years of impact and accomplishments, so many lives have been changed. International experience has trampolined U.S. people with disabilities to new heights, many of whom are leading respected organizations today. Alumni with disabilities from other countries, having

experienced the impact of the Americans with Disabilities Act in the U.S., have returned to change laws and policies in their own countries. Sometimes, you can only truly imagine what is possible when you have had the opportunity to experience it. I know I would not be who I am if it weren't for that transformational year in Australia.

And so, I would like to profoundly thank the countless people who have made the NCDE so successful: our friends for so many years in the U.S. State Department, especially David Levin and Bob Persiko, our colleagues in international exchange, and the many, many MIUSA alumni and other disability leaders working tirelessly in the United States and the world.

We hope all of you will join us in celebration of the 30th anniversary of the NCDE. We look forward to continuing our work with determination and joy, to ensure that all people can Challenge Themselves and Change the World™ through international exchange.

Susan Sygall  
MIUSA CEO and Co-Founder  
MacArthur Fellow ■



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# Celebrating 30 Years of the NCDE

By Laurie Laird, Program Manager of the National Clearinghouse on Disability and Exchange

We are excited to bring you this special edition of the *AWAY* journal, celebrating 30 years of the National Clearinghouse on Disability and Exchange (NCDE). In these pages you'll read about the many people who made this project possible, developed its valuable resources, and contributed their own motivating personal stories and insights. From the NCDE origin story to perspectives from international exchange professionals to spotlights on the NCDE's impact, this issue is both reflective and forward looking at this critical juncture.

Since its founding, MIUSA's core mission has been to ensure that people with disabilities have access to the transformational experiences of international exchange. MIUSA was a pioneer in conducting disability-led, international exchanges for people with and without disabilities, focused on disability rights. At the same time, MIUSA was laser-focused on educating both study abroad and exchange providers on how to make all of their programs accessible, and people with disabilities about how to tap into the immense range of opportunities for international exchange. Through this work, MIUSA amassed experience and a trove of unique resources on all things related to international travel for people with disabilities.

As MIUSA's knowledge and reputation grew, leaders in Washington, D.C. began recognizing the need to dedicate resources to expand access to people with disabilities, particularly in U.S. sponsored international exchange programs. As a result, MIUSA was selected to administer the NCDE when it was established through a Congressional appropriation in 1995. Thirty years later, NCDE offers a rich repository of experiences and learnings of individuals and organizations in the international exchange and disability rights communities, who share a passionate commitment to making true access a reality.

We are grateful for the enthusiasm of the hundreds of people who have played a role in this project over the years. Colleagues in international exchange and disability rights, individuals and organizations, have served as advisors on the NCDE Roundtable Consortium, shared personal travel stories and recommendations, connected disability and international education offices on college campuses, co-presented at conferences, formed disability interest groups within exchange professional associations, offered dedicated scholarships, and so much more.

MIUSA has had the privilege to steward this multifaceted project as it has grown and



A World Awaits You (*AWAY*) is a publication of 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. It is supported in its implementation by Mobility International USA.

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“ We are humbled by the hundreds of people who have played a role in this project over the years. ”



adapted to meet the changing needs of the field and the world. What a ride it has been!

At this writing, in today’s changing funding landscape, the shape that the NCDE will take, moving forward, may look a bit different. But there is no doubt that MIUSA will carry on with the work that is at our core:

ensuring that people with disabilities have equal opportunities to pursue all types of international exchange.

We hope you enjoy reading the stories in this AWAY journal and will join us in strengthening our collective mission.

Onward! ■

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# The Story of the NCDE's Beginnings

By Justin Harford, NCDE Project Specialist

This year marks the 30th anniversary of the National Clearinghouse on Disability and Exchange (NCDE), a U.S. State Department-funded initiative, aimed at increasing the participation of people with disabilities in education abroad.

This groundbreaking project would not have come to fruition without the persistent efforts and foresight of Susan Sygall, CEO of Mobility International USA (MIUSA), and disability rights leaders like Pat Wright, long-time strategist for the Disability Rights Education Defense Fund (DREDF).

After first meeting in Washington, DC in the 1980s, Susan and Pat became friends and colleagues, traveling the world, meeting with disability rights champions, and encouraging people with disabilities to become citizen diplomats and leaders in their countries. Their 30+ year collaboration, rooted in a shared commitment to equality and leadership, transformed the landscape of international exchange for individuals with disabilities.

## The Seeds of an Idea: The 1980s

The genesis of the NCDE can be traced back to Susan's master's project at the University of Oregon in 1980. Her work culminated in three practical booklets: a guide to international exchange programs, a guide to volunteer abroad projects for people with disabilities, and a guide offering tips specifically for wheelchair riders for international travel.

"As part of my project, I interviewed about 20 or 30 international exchange programs like

International Christian Youth Exchange (ICYE) and Council on International Educational Exchange (CIEE) and asked them whether they were engaging people with disabilities and if so, how they were doing that," Susan recounts. The survey results, along with interviews of organizations for the volunteer abroad guide, consistently revealed a demand for more information and technical assistance. While a few organizations, such as the social justice-oriented International Christian Youth Exchange (ICYE) and the Danish Mellum Folk Samverki, were actively engaging disabled participants, many others hadn't considered it or lacked the know-how.

This gap – between a nascent interest in accessible international exchange and the practical means to achieve it – planted the seed for a project that would share MIUSA's abundant technical know-how with the international exchange and education abroad field.

**“ This gap – between a nascent interest in accessible international exchange and the practical means to achieve it – planted the seed for a project. ”**



Pat Wright (far right) in 2001, when she was awarded the Presidential Citizens Medal by President Bill Clinton for her work on the ADA.



Welcoming attendees at an event celebrating the 20th anniversary of Mobility International USA.

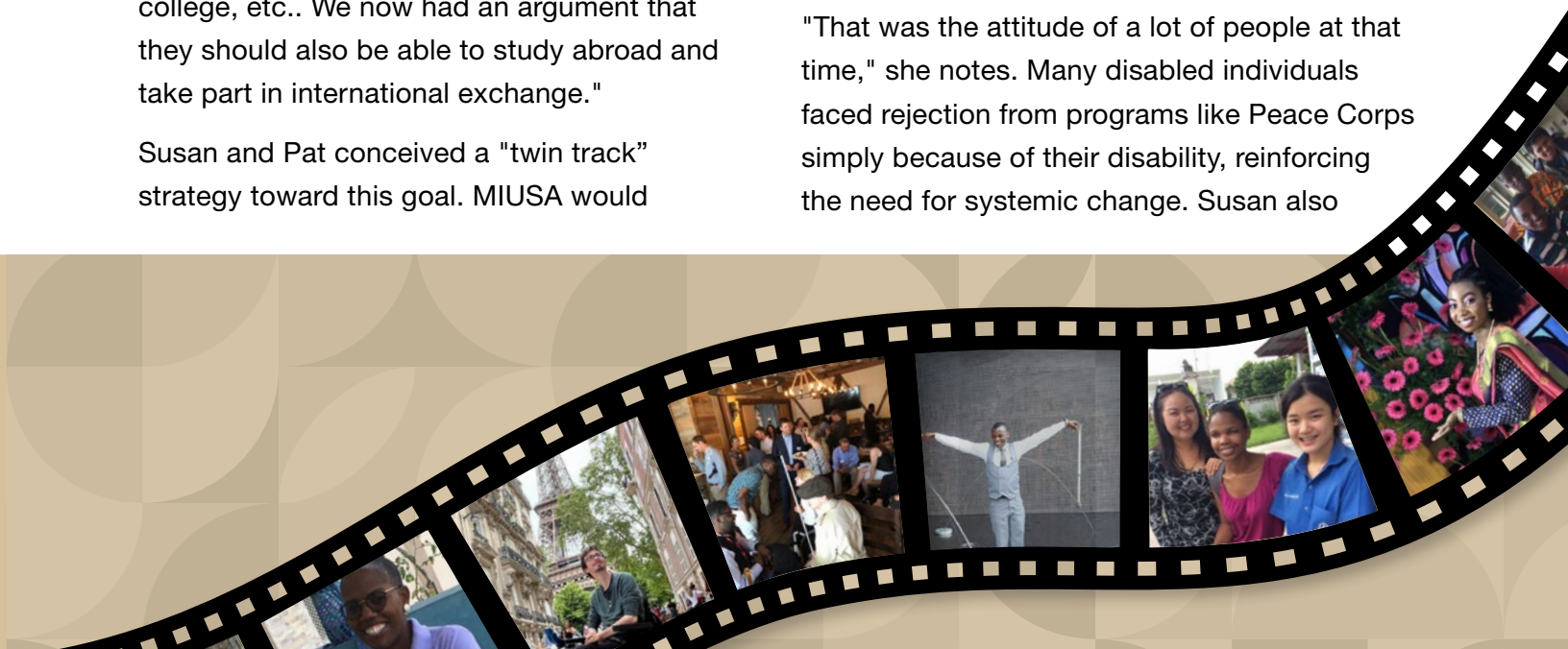
## Building a Movement: Leveraging Civil Rights Progress

The early U.S. disability rights movement in the early 1990s provided a fertile ground for this seed of a vision to grow. Section 504 of the 1973 Rehab Act and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), key U.S. disability rights laws, had already laid critical groundwork ensuring rights to education. According to Pat Wright, the next logical step was to extend these rights to international opportunities. "For the first time, people with disabilities, kids with disabilities, young adults with disabilities, had gone through high school, college, etc.. We now had an argument that they should also be able to study abroad and take part in international exchange."

Susan and Pat conceived a "twin track" strategy toward this goal. MIUSA would

continue to offer exchange programs, led by and for people with diverse disabilities, with countries such as Germany, Mexico, Bulgaria, Azerbaijan and China. At the same time, MIUSA would scale up resources and trainings to make international exchange programs accessible, and to empower disabled individuals to know that these opportunities were possible and that they had a right to them.

The path was not without its challenges. Discrimination, intentional or not, was rampant. Susan recalls a story in which a designer, hired by an exchange provider, photoshopped out a participant's crutches from a brochure cover, believing the image would be unappealing. "That was the attitude of a lot of people at that time," she notes. Many disabled individuals faced rejection from programs like Peace Corps simply because of their disability, reinforcing the need for systemic change. Susan also





remembers an individual, "very high up" in the U.S. government, who argued that international exchange programs were intended for "citizen diplomats and leaders", implying that disabled people were neither of these things.

## The Fight for Funding: A Congressional Breakthrough

Recognizing the need for official backing, Susan and Pat joined forces with government officials and disability leaders. They engaged with State Department leadership, notably Bob Persico and David Levin, emphasizing that disabled Americans should have the same opportunities as non-disabled peers to important programs such as Fulbright Scholarships and Peace Corps. The idea resonated within the State Department, mirroring a national sense of pride and excitement following the 1993 passage of the ADA.

With State Department support, Susan and Pat took their cause to Capitol Hill. Working with congressional figures like Senator Hatfield (then Chair of the Appropriations Committee), Senator Merkley, and Senator Wyden, they successfully achieved a direct congressional appropriation of funds to the State Department for the purpose of establishing a clearinghouse. Pat explains, "Our strategy was to first educate members of the Appropriations Committee on the absence of people with disabilities in



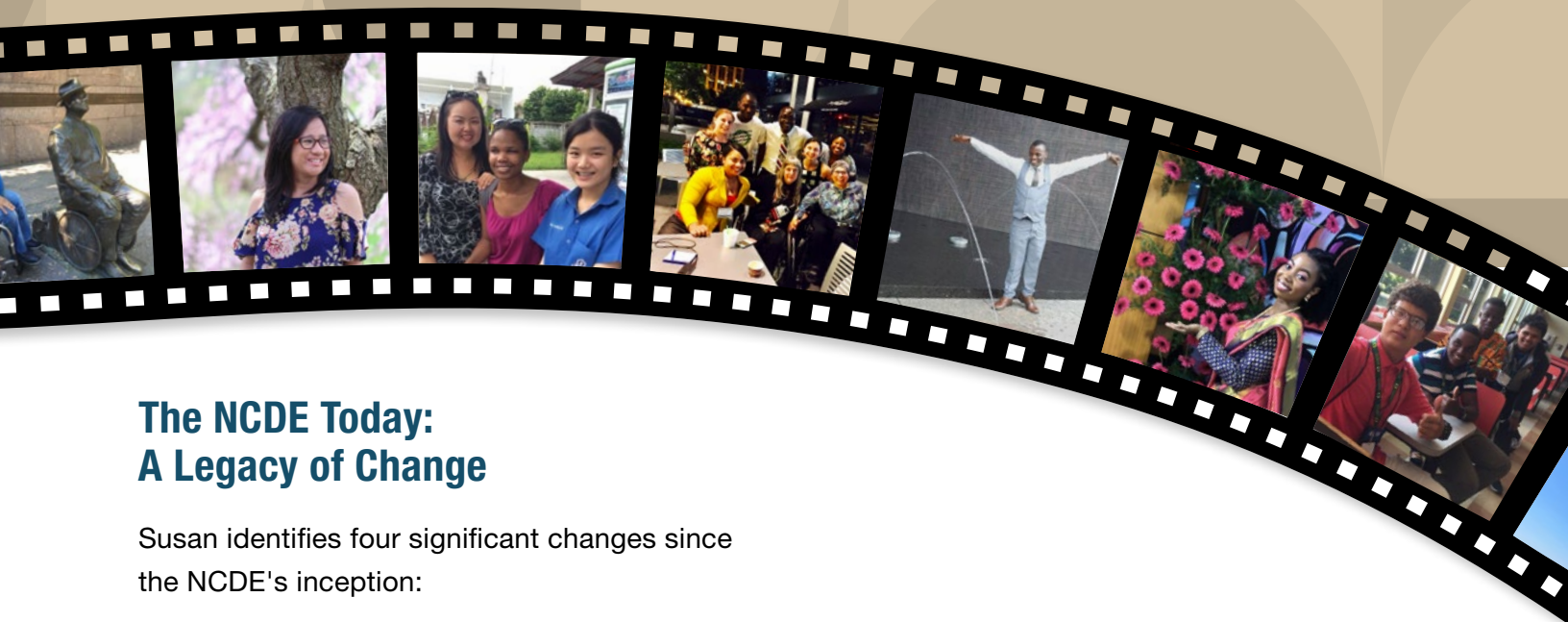
Susan Sygall in Vietnam in 1997



Traveling in Stockholm, Sweden in 2017

U.S. sponsored exchange programs. We had to identify the specific need, and show that MIUSA was an expert in this area." MIUSA was the logical recipient of the appropriation, because it was the only entity at the time that could demonstrate an extensive background in planning and executing exchange programs that engaged disabled participants.

The appropriation, secured under Senator Hatfield's leadership, marked a turning point, signaling a sustained commitment from the State Department that has lasted for 30 years.



## The NCDE Today: A Legacy of Change

Susan identifies four significant changes since the NCDE's inception:

1. Shift from "Why" to "How": The conversation has moved from justifying participation of people with disabilities as important, to understanding how to make international exchange opportunities accessible. Today, NCDE webinars consistently draw large audiences (100-150 registrants), and questions are focused on the "how". NCDE's technical assistance offers practical strategies to resolve access challenges, arrange accommodations, etc.
  2. Critical Mass: There is a growing "critical mass" of disabled individuals participating in international exchange, such as Fulbright Scholars, Peace Corps volunteers, FLEX and YES program students, and so many more. The existence of groups like "Fulbrighters with Disabilities" and a NAFSA (Association of International Educators) interest group for people with disabilities demonstrates this cultural shift. While data still shows underrepresentation of those with physical and sensory disabilities compared to non-apparent disabilities, overall participation has increased.
  3. Disability Rights Laws Around the World: International exchange programs, particularly those that bring participants from other countries to the U.S., have directly led to disability legislation worldwide. International participations who experience the impact of disability laws in the U.S. have returned home to push for similar legislation, often modeled after the ADA. Pat calls this "living diplomacy," where direct experience fuels policy change.
  4. Emergence of Global Leaders: Many MIUSA alumni have become influential leaders in their home countries, running independent living centers, shaping national policy, and even entering parliament, like Asia Yaghi, a wheelchair user from Jordan. Susan firmly believes that international exchange is a "trampoline" for disabled individuals, essential for developing future world leaders.
- The NCDE, born from a belief that people with disabilities could and should participate fully in education abroad, continues to be a potent testament to the transformative power of international exchange for people with disabilities worldwide. ■

# The National Clearinghouse on Disability and Exchange:

## Three decades of building bridges, changing perceptions, and broadening international horizons for people with disabilities

**By David Levin**, retired Senior Program Manager in the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs

In 1994 the U.S. Congress asked the U.S. Information Agency (USIA) to develop a mechanism to promote and increase international exchange opportunities for people with disabilities. As the U.S. government's leader in funding and managing international exchanges, we at USIA were excited about this request. It meshed well with our internal conversations already taking place as to how to build upon ways we were serving persons with disabilities. We saw this effort as a means to enhance our position as the primary catalyst and leverager in the international exchanges arena.

USIA Director Joseph Duffey asked me to take on this assignment. I drafted a blueprint for a resource clearinghouse that could foster international exchange opportunities for people with disabilities. We issued a Request for Proposals, and conducted a national competition for an organization that could manage such an operation. While we received many inquiries, only one proposal was forthcoming – from Mobility International USA (MIUSA). It was a strong, creative submission. MIUSA's pioneering co-founder and CEO Susan Sygall was an alumna of a Rotary exchange to



**David Levin (center) with MIUSA staff Rhonda Raven Neuhaus and Susan Sygall in 2000**



**With MIUSA colleagues at the NCDE's World of Options Conference and Expo in 2000**



Australia as a wheelchair rider, and knew well the life-changing benefits that could accrue to disabled people through international exchange. Further, MIUSA had already received a number of grants from USIA to conduct international exchanges for young people and professionals with and without disabilities, and had a solid track record. We awarded a cooperative agreement to MIUSA in 1995 to administer the National Clearinghouse on Disability and Exchange (NCDE) and as they say, the rest is history, with funding renewed annually since then.

The NCDE has succeeded admirably and is now a much recognized and appreciated global resource. I believe that this success is attributed to the NCDE mission, objectives and three key operating principles and practices.

First, the Clearinghouse intentionally serves dual constituencies. NCDE provides resources and information to the disability community about international opportunities, and the importance of participating in international exchange. Equally, the NCDE supports exchange providers, such as colleges and universities, NGOs, and government agencies with technical assistance and resources to increase the number of participants with disabilities, and to ensure that their experiences are successful by providing

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“reasonable accommodations” as necessary. This dual focus also underlies NCDEs convening of a Roundtable Advisory Committee (RTC) comprised equally of leaders from key international exchange and disability-focused organizations. The RTC advises the Clearinghouse on how the NCDE’s efforts can best jointly serve the two communities, building connections and collaboration between them.

Second, the NCDE’s strength is in its commitment and ability to continually expand and enhance its operations, services, and capabilities. By building on successful activities and responding to feedback from people in the disability and international exchange communities alike, NCDE’s expertise, resources, and services have strengthened over time. Examples of these efforts are extensive website and self-service information database; an annual “A World Awaits You” (AWAY) Journal, highlighting the successful participation of people with disabilities in international exchange; an informative “Access to Exchange” newsletter; a “Ripple Effects” podcast series; Campus Collaboration Campaigns linking education abroad and disability service offices on respective college and university campuses; and successful extern programs which build on exchange alumni experiences.

Strong technology skills have been a hallmark of Clearinghouse operations throughout its history.

**“ The Clearinghouse has been an invaluable partner to the U.S. Department of State, helping it build disability access as an expectation in its own constellation of international exchange programs. ”**

## A Champion for NCDE: Bob Persiko

*Champions in the U.S. Department of State were key to accessing federal funding for MIUSA's work and eventually the grant that established the NCDE. In addition to David Levin's consistent backing over the years, Bob Persiko, Director of the Youth Programs Division of the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs in the late 1980's, was an early and stalwart supporter.*

*As he reflects:*

“I was involved in international educational exchanges at the US Information Agency (USIA) .... At some point in the 1980's I was introduced to Susan Sygall, whose passion and support for the participation of people with disabilities in international exchanges was contagious. We explored ways to use federal funding to support MIUSA's fledgling work. Later this resulted in grant funding for the National Clearinghouse on Disability and Exchange (NCDE)...It was not always an easy sell to get the bureaucracy onboard with a commitment to the participation of people with disabilities. Susan had a way of persuading people through her efforts. I remember one meeting where Susan, in her enthusiasm, rose dramatically from her wheelchair to make a convincing point to State Department officials.

Often it took bringing decisionmakers into contact with participants to demonstrate the importance of reaching people with disabilities. I spent a weekend in Eugene, Oregon, observing one such program, which had a profound impact on me. I also recall meeting with MIUSA's German counterpart and learning about their difficulties getting government support. I was proud that my engagement in these activities demonstrated the commitment of the federal government to MIUSA's mission.

My interaction with MIUSA participants gave me a profound understanding of and appreciation for how the exchange experience favorably impacted those who otherwise might have been excluded from programs. It became an important contribution to government-sponsored educational exchanges, and a vital element of how the US is perceived abroad.”





NCDE staff have become experts at creating fully accessible media, trainings, and virtual and in-person events. These have involved groundbreaking “Joining Hands” conferences, bringing the disability and international exchange communities together for training and dialogue. NCDE activities have taken place in Eugene, Oregon, where MIUSA and the Clearinghouse are based, and in many other places: New York City, Boston, Washington, DC, Chicago, Louisville, Atlanta, Albuquerque, Denver, New Orleans, Houston, Berkeley, Vancouver, Seoul, and Barcelona, to name just a handful.

Third, the NCDE continually enhances its relevance and expertise, by spotlighting specific themes such as international opportunities for participants with visual impairments, people with non-apparent disabilities, youth with disabilities, and disabled community college students. Other themes were highlighted include increasing access to foreign language

**“Of all the activities in which I was engaged during my 4+ decades of federal service, the NCDE was unique in the way that it enabled us to be creative.”**



**Sharing NCDE information at the National Council on Independent Living annual conference in 2017**



**Speaking at the NCDE Roundtable Consortium meeting in 2023**

teaching and learning, experientially-based exchanges, and programs to and from the Muslim world.

The Clearinghouse has been an invaluable partner to the U.S. Department of State, helping it build disability access as an expectation throughout its own constellation of international exchange programs. These programs extended to Fulbright Programs, International Visitor Leadership programming, youth exchanges, foreign student advising, professional, sports, and cultural exchanges, and study abroad. State Department and partner organization staff in the United States and abroad have developed commitment and experience in this area, often through NCDE training. I have often remarked that I wished there were NCDE-type entities serving other constituencies underrepresented in international exchange.

I was privileged to launch the NCDE, and to work closely with MIUSA through the NCDE's journey until my retirement in 2023. I appreciated participating in NCDE activities throughout the United States, especially my

visits to Eugene for Clearinghouse site-visits. Above all, I truly enjoyed working, for decades, with MIUSA CEO Susan Sygall, with Cindy Lewis, MIUSA's dedicated Program Director, and of course with the NCDE's talented and committed project managers over time — Carole Zoom, Pamela Houston, Michele Scheib, Cerise Roth-Vinson, Monica Malhotra, and Laurie Laird. They have all demonstrated the NCDE's unwavering commitment to its mission and to a firm belief in the value and importance of what it does.

Of all the activities in which I was engaged during my four plus decades of federal service, the NCDE was unique in the way that it enabled us to be creative. For thirty years we collaborated, continually "pushing the envelope," enhancing and expanding Clearinghouse products, services, operations, reach, effectiveness, and impact.

I congratulate the National Clearinghouse on Disability and Exchange for the status it has achieved, evolving into a respected and valued global resource, and wish it many more years of success. ■

# The Shifting Tides of Global Exchange: NCDE Manager Perspectives

By Justin Harford

For three decades, the National Clearinghouse on Disability and Exchange (NCDE) has been at the forefront of a quiet revolution, transforming the landscape of international education for individuals with disabilities. What began as an arduous effort to prove the very possibility of their participation has evolved into a vibrant, collaborative field focused on empowering global access. Through the insights of two women who steered its course at different points – Carole Zoom, its first manager, and Monica Malhotra, who managed the program from 2016 to 2022 – we witness the profound shifts the NCDE has navigated over 30 years.



**Former NCDE Managers  
Carole Zoom (left)  
and Monica  
Malhotra (above)**

## The Pioneering Spirit: Proving What's Possible (The 1990s)

When Carole Zoom took the helm of the NCDE in the mid-1990s, the concept of international exchange for people with disabilities was, for many, a foreign one. A wheelchair user herself, Zoom vividly recalls her personal struggle in the 1980s to participate in a college exchange program in Belgium, only to be denied due to her mobility disability. This personal experience fueled her early work.

"At the beginning of the Clearinghouse, if we got one person in the room of 30 who understood and was interested in helping make sure that the playing field was even for students with disabilities, that felt like a victory," Zoom recounted. The prevailing attitude was skepticism, often met with pushback.

Professionals in the international exchange field did not readily accept the necessity of serving students with disabilities. And it was unclear how the relatively new ADA applied to study abroad and other international opportunities.

Yet, even in these challenging early days, Carole Zoom sensed a shift. "The tide was turning," she observed, as exchange programs, after gaining some direct experience with students with disabilities, became "more open, more interested, and more willing to accommodate and stretch." In addition, as the ADA was more clearly interpreted to apply to many aspects of international exchange, organizations recognized the importance of being informed and complying with the law.

The NCDE's strategy in those early years was direct: prove it. As the NCDE launched,



Mobility International USA (MIUSA), the organization administering the NCDE, had accrued more than 10 years of experience operating international exchange programs led by and for people with a variety of disabilities. MIUSA's experience conducting accessible, cross-disability, cross-cultural programs, in the U.S. and around the world, communicated a powerful message to skeptics: "It's possible because we're doing it."

Technologically, the landscape was rudimentary. The NCDE had to build its database from scratch, using early versions of Microsoft Access. Nonetheless, soon after launching, inquiries poured in to the NCDE staff, via paper mail, phone, and fax, and then by email. Information requests at that time tended to focus on accommodations for blind or deaf students or those with mobility impairments, largely because at that time people with non-apparent disabilities such

as learning disabilities were less frequently recognized in the context of academic accommodations.

### **The Accelerating Wave: From "Why" to "How" (The 2000s and Beyond)**

Fast forward to the mid-2010s, and Monica Malhotra took the reins as manager, building on the foundations Carole Zoom and others had laid. Malhotra, who experienced the world-changing power of studying abroad herself before her diagnosis with multiple sclerosis, immediately recognized the NCDE's critical mission. She joined the Clearinghouse at the tail end of the "convincing people" phase.

"Within a few years, we were no longer convincing people. They weren't asking 'why?' They were asking 'how? Tell me how to do it'," Malhotra explained. This pivotal shift

**“ MIUSA’s experience conducting accessible, cross-disability, cross-cultural programs, in the U.S. and around the world, communicated a powerful message to skeptics: 'It’s possible because we’re doing it’ ”**



**Monica Malhotra presenting at a leadership summit in 2019**



prompted the NCDE to intensify its focus on providing more extensive online resources and tools, and delivering training to broader audiences. The demand for NCDE's expertise skyrocketed, with invitations for workshops and presentations pouring in, expanding exponentially during the COVID-19 pandemic. The NCDE responded by expanding online trainings and convenings on virtual platforms like Zoom.

"Some of those virtual activities and engagement were the highlights for me," Malhotra said, citing the Virtual Joining Hands Symposium, which drew over a thousand registrants, and the Access to Exchange Externship program. These virtual initiatives dramatically increased access to information and engagement for a global audience, bypassing the financial and logistical barriers of in-person conferences.

Today, what was once the NCDE's unique mission for participation of people with disabilities in international exchange has become a shared commitment and responsibility. International exchange providers are implementing a range of strategies and practices to firmly imbed disability access into



**Carole Zoom today, at home in Hawaii**

their programs. These range from dedicated scholarships that cover disability-related accommodations, to intentional partnerships between disability resource offices and global education departments on college campuses. Sessions on disability access at international education conferences are commonplace, often organized by professionals within the field. There has also been a notable increase in requests for support and resources to make exchange accessible for students with non-apparent disabilities, such as dyslexia, ADHD, and autism.

“ Today, what was once the NCDE's unique mission for participation of people with disabilities in international exchange has become a shared commitment and responsibility. ”



funding support for disability accommodations, particularly for high-cost needs like interpreters or personal attendants. Zoom champions innovative financial models, for example, an "insurable event" approach in which institutions proactively contribute to a fund to ensure coverage of future accommodation costs, as well as policy changes to incentivize accessibility.

Malhotra echoes this, hoping for continued emphasis on access for all, urging programs to take greater responsibility to ensure that the progress made to date continues.

As the NCDE looks to its future, the question of leadership and long-term sustainability looms. The foundation is strong, built on decades of pioneering best practices and continuous adaptation. The journey from initial skepticism to widespread acceptance, fueled by dedicated individuals and evolving technology, illustrates the profound and lasting impact of the National Clearinghouse on Disability and Exchange.

The NCDE is a testament to the power of persistence, partnership, and the enduring belief in international exchange, with all its transformative power, should offer a World of Options™ for all. ■

## Lasting Impact and Future Horizons

The impact of the NCDE is evident today in the "rights-bearing attitude" of younger professionals now carving out careers in international exchange. The NCDE not only provides information and encouragement, but also fosters a vital community of practice, a consortium of dedicated individuals and organizations.

Yet, challenges persist. Both Zoom and Malhotra touch upon the ongoing challenges of

# The NCDE's Lasting Legacy: Professionals Reflect on Best Practices

By Justin Harford, NCDE Project Specialist

The legacy of the National Clearinghouse on Disability and Exchange (NCDE) is woven into the policies, practices, and philosophies of countless institutions and organizations. The impact is evident through the experiences of the professionals who have partnered with the NCDE over the years, individuals like Irene Scott from Texas A&M University, Julie Pollard from the University of California Education Abroad Program (UCEAP), and Maritheresa Frain, formerly with the Council on International Educational Exchange (CIEE). Their stories highlight a journey from hesitant first steps to a collective, proactive commitment to making global education accessible for all.

## A Foundational Resource for Practical Guidance

For many professionals, the NCDE has served as a foundational and indispensable resource. Irene Scott describes the NCDE as an "essential part" of her team's efforts at Texas A&M University, a go-to for "additional guidance, best practices, or destination-specific insight." Her team regularly consults the NCDE's searchable databases and practical tip sheets, tools that provide the on-the-ground support needed to navigate the complexities of international programs.

For Maritheresa Frain, the NCDE's resources were a source of empowerment at a pivotal moment. After a MIUSA conference session in which she heard from a student with a physical

**“ The relationship between the NCDE and the professionals it serves is a dynamic one, built on a two-way flow of knowledge. While the NCDE has been a source of guidance, it has also been an active listener, refining its own resources based on feedback from the field. ”**



disability who had successfully studied abroad, Frain was determined to make her programs more accessible. However, when she returned to her team in Seville, their initial reaction was skepticism. Frain credits NCDE tools and guidance with empowering her team to know what questions to ask and how to prepare for a student's access needs. These resources were the first steps toward making the dream of accessible programs a reality.

**“ The NCDE’s strength is in its ability to listen to these successes and challenges, learn from them, and then amplify these innovative solutions to the broader community. ”**

## Driving Professional Development and Training

Julie Pollard recounts working with NCDE staff to build knowledge and confidence among her UCEAP colleagues. She notes that many professionals are hesitant to ask or address disability-related questions, feeling they lack the expertise.

Pollard shares a powerful example of a student with hip dysplasia, who routinely used accessible transportation on their U.S. campus. The student had not considered that accessible transport might not be available in a major European city, and therefore hadn't thought to inform UCEAP about their disability. The student struggled with access during the program, which Pollard described as a “failure on [UCEAP’s] end.”

In response, with training and support from NCDE, UCEAP developed a collaborative process that more effectively encourages students to identify potential access needs, in order for the program to identify resources and arrange accommodations.

## A Collaborative Feedback Loop: Listening to the Field

The relationship between the NCDE and the professionals it serves is a dynamic one, built on a two-way flow of knowledge. While the NCDE has been a source of guidance, it has

also been an active listener, refining its own resources based on feedback from the field.

Maritheresa Frain highlights these crucial "feedback loops," explaining that her on-the-ground team at CIEE would validate the NCDE's checklists and then report back on new best practices. For instance, after working with a blind student, CIEE developed training modules for faculty on how to use descriptive language that would make excursions and lectures more accessible.

Frain notes that these modules were eventually used by the NCDE, a perfect example of a localized solution becoming a resource for the entire field.

Similarly, Julie Pollard points to the importance of localized examples and real-world challenges in shaping the NCDE's work. She was inspired by a university in Cairo that had designed its campus with fountains that sounded differently in each quadrant to assist visually impaired students with navigation.

According to Pollard, this kind of creative, practical application is something the NCDE is uniquely positioned to "lift up in our field" and share more broadly.

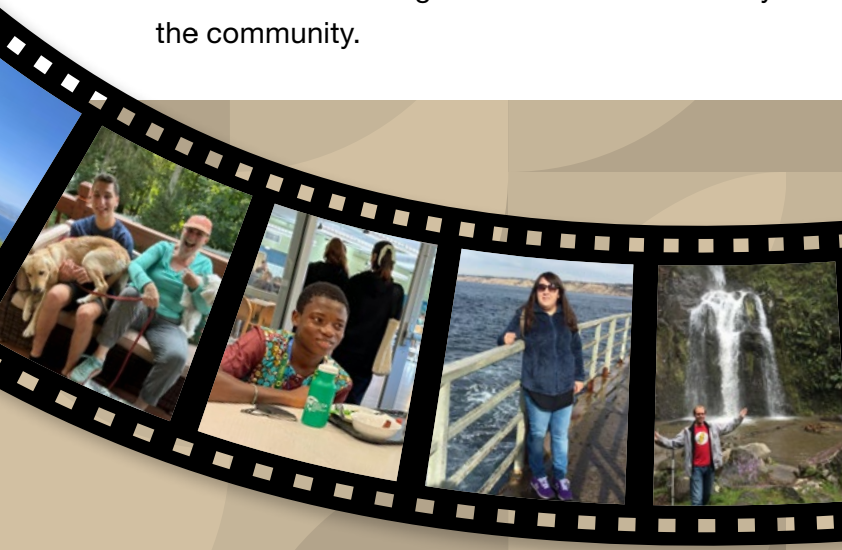
This experience, shared with the NCDE, informs the clearinghouse's advice to other institutions, ensuring its resources are grounded in the latest challenges and solutions faced by the community.

## Forging a Community of Practice

One of the NCDE's most significant contributions has been its role as a convener and coalition-builder.

Maritheresa Frain's story is a testament to this, starting with that pivotal conference panel where the NCDE brought a student's voice to the forefront. This simple experience transformed Frain's perspective, and initiated her commitment to making international exchange accessible.

**“ The NCDE helped move the field from a passive, reactive mindset to an 'active philosophy that all students can study abroad'. ”**



Over the years, the partnership between organizations like CIEE and the NCDE has flourished, leading to a NCDE's regular presence at conferences, convening sessions featuring both professionals and participants with disabilities. This dynamic created a repository of experiences and practices that has strengthened programs and fostered a community dedicated to a shared philosophy.

This collaborative spirit has led to tangible outcomes, such as a scholarship program, offered by CIEE in collaboration with NCDE, commemorating the 25th anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act.

The scholarship program demonstrated an innovative approach for supporting costs of disability related accommodations, and also spotlighted CIEE's investment in accessible international opportunities as a fundamental part of an organization's mission.

## The Ripple Effect: Cultivating a New Philosophy

Ultimately, the NCDE's work has inspired a fundamental shift in the philosophical underpinnings of education abroad. Frain explains that the NCDE helped move the field from a passive, reactive mindset to an "active philosophy that all students can study abroad." This shift has led to more critical conversations

and creative solutions. Her team, for instance, learned to look to local resources, such as the Organización de Ciegos Españoles. (ONCE) in Spain, which provides services for people who are blind. This connection allowed them to develop tactile models of cathedrals for a student and create faculty training modules that were later adopted by the NCDE.

Irene Scott's organization embodies this philosophical shift. She highlights her team's "just because it has never been done, does not mean it cannot be done" mentality, which directly mirrors the NCDE's ethos. Her team is proud of their efforts to facilitate complex accommodations, such as arranging sign language interpreters for Deaf students or covering increased transportation costs for wheelchair users. The NCDE's strength is in its ability to listen to these successes and challenges, learn from them, and then amplify these innovative solutions to the broader community. The NCDE's work is a testament to the power of collaboration and the idea that true expertise is built on shared knowledge.

The work continues, as professionals look to the future, planning new ways to build awareness and encourage disclosure, ensuring that every student has the opportunity for a transformative international experience. ■



# A World of Possibilities:

## How a Global Leader Found Her Calling through the NCDE

By Justin Harford, NCDE Project Specialist

For many, the first international trip is a singular, life-changing event. For Johna Wright, it was just the beginning. A blind student with an insatiable curiosity for the world, Johna embarked on a journey that would take her to four continents and ultimately define her career path. While her drive and resilience are entirely her own, a small but vital piece of that story involves a program dedicated to making those very opportunities a reality for others: the National Clearinghouse on Disability and Exchange (NCDE).

Johna's story is a powerful testament to the NCDE's mission, which, since its establishment in 1995, has been to increase the number of people with disabilities who participate in international exchange programs. Through its Access to Exchange Externship, networking activities, and direct advising, the NCDE provided a series of touchpoints that helped transform Johna from a successful student traveler into a passionate leader in her field.

### From Traveler to Comparative Disability Scholar

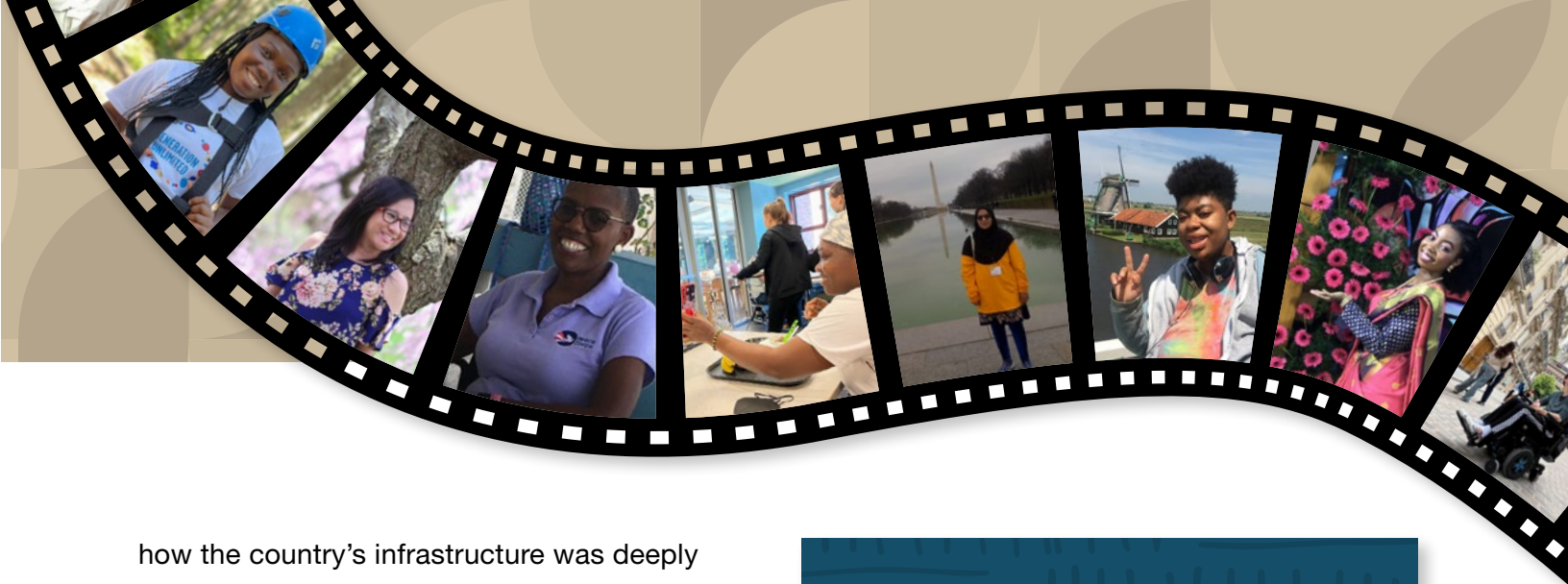
Johna's initial foray into international travel was a faculty-led business consulting service project to South Africa. While her professors were concerned about potential accessibility challenges, her experience proved to be a profound turning point. Johna quickly realized that while accessibility standards differ vastly from country to country, the core of the issue isn't a functional problem, but a difference in



**Johna Wright at home in Georgia (above) and traveling in Greece (left), where she led service learning trips for Mercer students in 2024**

approach. As she reflects, "I realized even though accessibility standards are not the same country to country, there are, of course, still disabled people that exist in these countries and find ways to accommodate themselves." This insight was her "aha" moment, sparking a newfound academic interest in comparative disability, and igniting a desire to see more of the world.

This initial trip was followed by a whirlwind of other programs, each one adding a new layer to her understanding. She spent a summer in Sweden studying sustainability and observed



how the country's infrastructure was deeply committed to accessibility, from tactile exhibits in museums to Braille placards on regional trains. Her semester in the UK, though cut short by the pandemic, offered more striking contrasts. She noted the challenge of uneven, historic streets, but was also pleasantly surprised to find Braille on all medicine boxes—a small, yet impactful detail she had never seen at home.

These experiences solidified her passion for accessibility and led her to focus her master's thesis and, later, her PhD on comparative disability in higher education. She realized that every country has its own unique strengths and weaknesses when it comes to disability access. As she puts it, "There's no country that is superior in every way...It's cool to get a full picture of how the world views disability."

### **The NCDE Externship: A Catalyst for Action**

After her international experiences, Johna saw an opportunity to channel her passion into action. She discovered the NCDE's Access to Exchange Externship on LinkedIn. The program was designed to empower individuals with disabilities to lead their own projects to promote study abroad. For Johna, it was a perfect fit. "I decided since all my experiences

**“ I realized even though accessibility standards are not the same country to country, there are, of course, still disabled people that exist in these countries and find ways to accommodate themselves. ”**



studying abroad had been so positive, I really wanted to help other disabled students get those same types of experiences. That's when I decided that I would apply for the externship.”

Johna's externship project was a virtual panel aimed at disabled Americans who were interested in study abroad but hesitant to take the first step. Johna was meticulous in her approach. She used her own network, such as her connections with the National Federation of the Blind (NFB), to find a broad group of speakers. Crucially, she branched out to other disability groups to ensure the panel was comprised of voices from those who are neurodivergent, deaf, hard of hearing, or have chronic illnesses.

But what truly made her project stand out was its unique follow-up component. After the panel, Johna and her fellow speakers offered one-on-one advising sessions. This personal connection proved to be incredibly effective. In the months that followed, she kept in contact with several students, two of whom went on to successfully complete their own exchange programs—one in Norway and another in South Korea. The externship was not just an event; it was a mentorship pipeline.

## A Career Shaped by a Clear Focus

Johna is unequivocal about the impact of the externship on her professional life. She states that it was "probably the thing that actually pushed me to apply for a job in study abroad and really cemented in me the need to help disabled students get these types of competitive experiences.”

The skills and focus she honed during the externship became the bedrock of her subsequent career. As a study abroad advisor and later a fellowship advisor, she worked with highly competitive awards like Fulbright, Gilman, and Boren. Drawing on her own experiences and the lessons from her externship, she was able to have meaningful, in-depth conversations with disabled students who never thought these opportunities were possible.

The externship also taught her practical, crucial skills in making events accessible, such as working with sign language interpreters and using captioning. These skills didn't just stay in the professional realm; they directly influenced her work as a lecturer at Mercer University, where she teaches a class on disability studies. She's now able to create a classroom



environment that empowers her students to think critically about accessibility.

## **A Ripple Effect**

The NCDE externship's influence extended far beyond Johna's advising and teaching. It opened doors to new and unexpected opportunities. Johna was selected for a US-Russia exchange through the Eurasia Foundation, which she attributes to the confidence and knowledge she gained through the externship. Paired with a Russian tour guide, she developed accessible travel guides for both countries, covering everything from airports to local attractions. This micro-project, she says, was something "I don't think I would have done had it not been for the... externship, because I had never really thought about disability and international travel outside of my own experience."

**“ I decided since all my experiences studying abroad had been so positive, I really wanted to help other disabled students get those same types of experiences. ”**

Today, Johna continues to be a powerful voice for change. She notes that even in major conferences, disability is often left out of the conversation. Equipped with the expertise gained from her extensive travel, her education, and the NCDE externship, she continues to push for a more accessible future. The NCDE, she believes, gave her more than just a project; it gave her a purpose. It provided her with the platform to practice her skills, build her confidence, and become a leader in a field that is still in desperate need of her unique vision and voice. ■

# International Exchange Presents Opportunities to Uplift Others

By Ashley Holben, NCDE Project Specialist

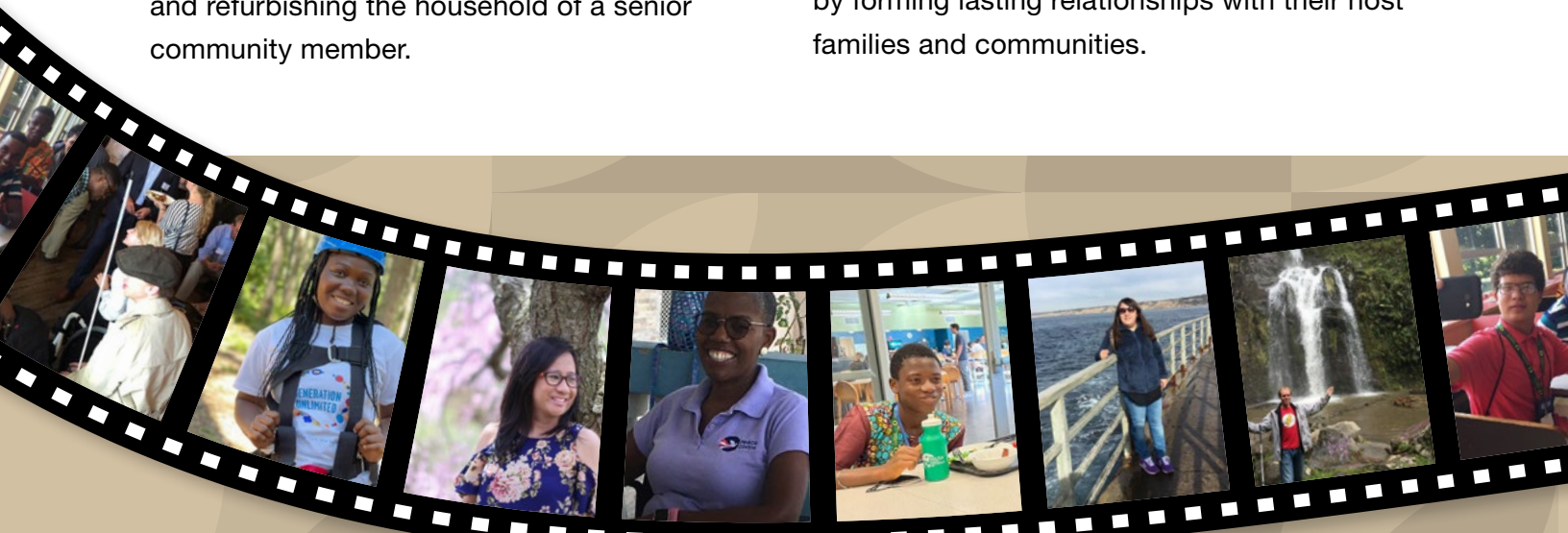
International exchange isn't just an individual experience. Every one person who travels represents their home community, or sometimes several communities. During their exchange, they make connections with host families, new friends, and other community members. And when they return home, the experience of having formed relationships abroad shapes their worldview in ways that continue to impact the people around them, creating ripples and returns that can be felt even years later.

Prince-Obed Ihara Balika's exchange year cultivated both friendships and fresh viewpoints that have endured a decade later. As a teenager, Balika was selected for the U.S. Department of State-sponsored Kennedy-Lugar Youth Exchange and Study (YES) program to travel from his home country of Ghana to the United States for the 2015-16 academic year. In St. Louis, Missouri, he lived with an American host family, attended a local high school, and volunteered his time with a food packing project and refurbishing the household of a senior community member.



**Prince-Obed Balika at an event for YES Alumni in Washington, DC, 2023**

Each year, hundreds of ambitious young people like Balika are selected from over 50 countries for the highly competitive YES scholarship. High school students from countries of strategic importance around the world live and study for an academic year in the United States. YES students serve as youth ambassadors of their home country, promoting mutual understanding by forming lasting relationships with their host families and communities.



Recognizing that young people with disabilities deserve the same opportunity to fulfill roles as leaders and citizen diplomats, MIUSA began a collaboration with American Councils, the YES program's implementing organization, in 2006, to ensure that YES participants with disabilities have what they need to fully participate in the program.

YES students with disabilities participate in MIUSA's Preparatory Workshop upon their arrival to the U.S. There, the students meet peers with disabilities - sometimes for the first time in their lives - while they discover U.S. disability culture and rights, test assistive technologies, visit a U.S. high school, participate in accessible recreation activities, volunteer with local organizations, before traveling to their host communities across the U.S. Before the students' arrival and throughout their exchange year, MIUSA assists exchange students and the organizations hosting them, providing referrals for specific disability accommodations, assistive technology, and other disability resources.

Recalling his own participation in the workshop, Balika reflects:

"As a person with albinism and partial visual impairment, I have experienced disability my entire life. [In my country] I was not aware of the rights available to persons with disabilities or the accommodations we were entitled to,

therefore in the past I suffered from prejudices and discrimination a lot. However, during the 2015 MIUSA workshop, I [was] lucky to relate and interact with persons with disabilities around the world, and I developed beyond measure. I had spent the majority of my childhood trying to fit in and to act 'normal'. It was during my YES exchange year that I understood that I was not 'abnormal'. I was differently abled, and that did not make me any less deserving of love and kindness."

Balika's international exchange experience accelerated his personal drive to champion not only his own rights but the rights of others living with disabilities in his home country. Upon returning to Ghana and completing his secondary studies, Balika enrolled in law school

**“ I had spent the majority of my childhood trying to fit in and to act 'normal'. It was during my exchange year that I understood that I was not 'abnormal'. ”**





Prince reunited with his American host family in St. Louis, Missouri, 2023

and began work at the National Council on Persons with Disabilities, where he assisted persons with disabilities with social and legal matters.

MIUSA and Balika reconnected many years after his days as a YES student, this time through the NCDE. Balika applied for NCDE's Access to Exchange Externship program, which invites international exchange alumni with disabilities to promote the participation of people with disabilities in international exchange. Balika saw the externship as an opportunity to serve as an ambassador for access, citizen diplomacy, and international exchange.

For his externship project, Balika hosted a webinar session for people with disabilities in Ghana to explore the many opportunities and benefits of international exchange. He invited his fellow members of the Special Students

Union of the University of Ghana and the Ghana Association of Persons with Albinism. He also tapped into his network of YES alumni in Ghana, to speak to their exchange experiences and disability accommodations that had been available to them during their exchange years.

One of these YES alumni was Joseph "PJ" Opong, a YES alum with a physical disability, who discussed the ways in which exchange programs teach participants with disabilities independence and self-reliance. Balika himself added that, especially for people with disabilities, international exchange can instill a sense of agency and opportunities to make decisions for oneself.

The NCDE Externship emphasizes anticipating planning for audiences of people with and without different types of disabilities. Balika took this lesson to heart, ensuring that his Deaf



**“ The NCDE Externship taught me how important it is to understand every individual and their respective disabilities in order to make sure that whatever project or activity I was leading was accessible. ”**

or hard of hearing attendees would have access to captions and sign language interpreting as needed, or that blind or visually impaired attendees could access images and information in accessible formats. “The NCDE Externship taught me how important it is to understand every individual and their disabilities in so that whatever project or activity I was leading was accessible and catered to their respective needs. This involves the media used, texts and the structure of presentations.”

The NCDE Externship reinvigorated Balika in his passion for disability rights - his rights - and to champion human rights causes in Ghana. As the secretary and subsequently the president of the YES Alumni Association in Ghana, Balika oversaw projects to benefit communities across the country, from a book drive in Nzulezu, a clothing drive at Mankessim, volunteer activities at Save Them Young Orphanage and Chosen

Children’s Center, and projects to promote awareness of cervical cancer and breast cancer.

One project Balika is especially proud to have helped launch is the Happy Perioding project, which aims to lessen the stigma around menstruation and to promote menstrual health and formal education among teenage girls in underprivileged communities. Through a series of training activities and seminars, Balika’s team had taught 160 young girls to make reusable sanitary pads and donated 854 disposable pads as well as 165 wet bags.

Today, at 27 years old, Balika is a final year student at the Ghana School of Law, and he is unlikely to take a break from using his experiences as a leader to uplift others anytime soon.

“Through my work life and my actions, I have the ability to empower the disenfranchised and anyone living with disabilities that I meet.” ■

# Reflections by Marca Bristo

As told to Ashley Holben, NCDE Project Specialist

Marca Bristo was a disability rights champion and the founding president and CEO of Access Living from 1980 until her retirement in August 2019. She passed away from cancer September 8, 2019, but her legacy continues.

During her career, Marca was a champion for people with disabilities to engage with intercultural exchange and supported NCDE's mission. With Marca's commitment and support, Access Living served on NCDE's Roundtable Consortium, providing a valuable disability-led organization perspective on issues pertaining to international exchange and disability. Based in Chicago, Access Living is a center for service and social change for people with disabilities, led by people with disabilities – and one of the first Independent Living Centers in the U.S.

At the time of this interview, conducted in 2016, NCDE had the opportunity to learn more about what drove Marca's passion for intercultural understanding.



Marca Bristo

My first experience with international issues was as the daughter of a Rotarian who hosted foreign exchange students in our home. I had several siblings from other countries, and it inspired me to apply to be a Rotary exchange student for my senior year. So, the day after my 17th birthday I got on my first airplane - in life - and flew to Manila where I spent a whole year, and it was a life altering-experience to see the world and to see how other people lived. To see the world - to see America through other people's eyes; and it really changed me and made me understand that we were part of something much bigger.

Later when I became disabled, and Access Living was formed, in our very first year we hosted this international exchange for people

who were post-polio survivors, and that's when I met the first disability rights leaders who had started to talk with each other across disability, across country lines. And again, I learned that disability is a unifying experience. It doesn't matter what country you're from. You don't have to speak each other's language to know each other's experience, and here in America, I now feel we've made a lot of progress, and it creates in me a sense of responsibility to want to give it away and learn from others from other cultures too, because they have a lot to offer us as well.

[Susan Sygall] and I met each other through our shared work, and I think we bonded just as women who were really into the international space, and over the years that relationship has



just been supported. I remember her sending people to Chicago a long time ago to introduce us to the international visitor organizations just to make the connection, and that connection has resulted in those organizations right now - World Chicago - using Access Living as one of the host sites where they bring their international visitors. Most of our work has been in the professional development world as opposed to the student exchange world. People are hungry to learn about engaging people with disabilities in development. So there's not a month that goes by not a month that goes by where we don't have international visitors coming.

It's a global world we live in where the boundaries are dissolving, and people with disabilities have a great deal to learn from one another. I really encourage Americans with disabilities in every way I can to get involved, because doing the work we do can get exhausting, and it's very uplifting to interact with people from other cultures to see how much we have in common, how our struggle is united, and how we have something to offer. Service, I think, is ultimately why we're here on

**“ Doing the work we do can get exhausting, and it's very uplifting to interact with people from other cultures to see how much we have in common, how our struggle is united, and how we have something to offer. ”**

the planet, and for me, being able to connect with others who are struggling sometimes against odds that are so much greater than ours is a way for us to give back to that which we've already accomplished here in this country.

International exchange programs for students broaden your worldview, demonstrate to potential employers that you have the chutzpah to pack up with everything else you're dealing with and figure out how to take on this challenge. And to me demonstrates that no matter what you want to do in life, that you're a person who has assertiveness, competence, self-confidence and really strong problem-solving abilities, and that is going to take you a long way. If you can navigate the world in the United States with a disability, trust me: while it might be more challenging you can navigate it over overseas as well. ■

# Collaborative Approaches in Education Abroad: Reflections Over 30 Years

By Heidi M. Soneson, PhD

The 30-year anniversary of Mobility International, USA (MIUSA)'s journal, *AWAY: A World Awaits You*, invites us to reflect on what the field of education abroad has accomplished on behalf of access for students with disabilities and where we should be headed as we look to the future.

The opportunity to reflect on this topic is particularly meaningful for me as an education abroad professional because I co-authored an article for the inaugural issue of this journal on the topic of “collaborative approaches”. At that time the University of Minnesota had initiated a Task Force on Disability Issues in International Exchange to foster dialogue across critical offices on campus, such as Disability Services and the Learning Abroad Center, regarding policies and procedures to support students with disabilities in their interest to study abroad. The Task Force focused on collaborative advising, cross-office training, the creation of resource materials, and consultation with MIUSA, as well as with colleagues in academia nationwide to identify best practices. As the definition of disability expanded to encompass “invisible disabilities”, the Task Force, which involved the University of Minnesota counseling center, developed processes and best practices to proactively provide expanded support services. As part of our collaboration efforts, we also applied for and received a multi-year



**Heidi Soneson**

grant from the U.S. Department of Education that resulted in the landmark Access Abroad initiative.

Access Abroad launched a national and international collaboration to mainstream education abroad advising and study opportunities for students with disabilities. Prior to Access Abroad, students often met with me to inquire whether it might be possible to study abroad and which program was designed for students with disabilities. Students often assumed that studying abroad was unlikely, and only a few felt emboldened to come to the study abroad office or disability services to inquire. Thanks to the invaluable collaboration

with institutional colleagues nationwide, key education abroad provider organizations, and interested university partners abroad, Access Abroad established several key guiding principles and practices that continue to frame conversations on access and education abroad today. Highlights are:

- All education abroad programs have the potential to be accessible.
- All education abroad advisors and disability services staff are empowered to advise on access abroad for their students.
- Key information on access at study sites abroad should be made readily available on program websites and in advising materials so that students can consider their options in advance.
- A streamlined and seamless advising process across institutional offices allows students with disabilities to inquire and receive guidance on education abroad opportunities.
- A focus on what is needed and how to identify the best program match is paramount.

- Recognizing the unique expertise of each advising office allows for the exchange of knowledge and a collaborative approach to brainstorming and problem-solving student access needs.

The institutions and organizations who participated in the initial federal grant collaboration spearheaded access information for their programs abroad on their websites and helped to develop critical processes to assist students, education abroad advisors, and disability services staff in their support to students with disabilities. Some of these early partners and their current resources are listed at the end of this article. I am also grateful for key insights I gained from students on my programs over the years, such as:

- Every accommodation need is unique. Dialogue with the student to understand the details of what they need and expect.
- Investigate possible existing on-site support infrastructure and services that in-country local students can access and that a study abroad student could possibly also utilize.
- Countries with established disability regulations and infrastructure may or may not be the best choice for a student. Countries that prioritize flexible support and creative problem-solving may be a preferred location.

“ In our current times, ...  
the need to look ahead  
and engage in strategic  
planning is critical. ”





- Engage the student in the dialogue regarding possible accommodations abroad as well as cultural differences between what the student has come to expect on a US campus versus what they will experience abroad.

In our current times, with diminishing federal funding for support services and organizations such as MIUSA, the need to look ahead and engage in strategic planning is critical. I conferred recently with Roberta (Bobbi) Cordano, President of Gallaudet University and previously Director of Disability Services at the University of Minnesota, about our future goals and priorities. We identified the following:

- Each institution and organization involved with education abroad will need to make it a priority to carry forward the guiding principles that organizations such as MIUSA and initiatives such as Access Abroad have established and published.
- Establish and foster the kind of task force mentioned in this article or other similar initiatives to continue the dialogue and collaboration on your own campus that allows for cohesive student advising to consider and support all student needs.
- Engage faculty who lead your programs abroad to assist in investigating access at

the overseas study location. When faculty with disabilities lead programs abroad, seek their insights to document in your program materials to assist future student participants. Their own experiences can be helpful for future advising.

- The community of knowledgeable colleagues is now much wider. Utilize conferences and outreach options such as the SECUSS-L listserv and NAFSA's EA Knowledge Community listserv to seek advice and inquire about best practices.
- The range and type of education abroad programs have grown significantly over the last decades. Ensure that your institutional education abroad portfolio has short and long-term programs, faculty-directed as well as center-based and integrated options, a range of geographical locations, direct enrollment and consortium or provider options. This range of options and types of potential support abroad benefits students with disabilities and the entire campus population.
- Invite all students through program and advising meeting evaluations to share what kinds of support and services would facilitate education abroad for them. This entails access to your office, your education

“ Whether there is a short-term accommodation need or a comprehensive access investment, education abroad advising and programming will succeed for the greatest number of students if we proactively establish and foster a multi-faceted approach to our student outreach and support. ”



abroad information materials, and program support abroad. The more we can plan ahead, the more successful we will be in achieving our goal to enrich student lives through education abroad.

- Finally, emphasize “human-centered design” - an approach to advising and programming that emphasizes and embraces the variety of human experiences that constitutes student life and learning and that enables meaningful, responsible participation of all students in international programs. Whether there is a short-term accommodation need or a comprehensive access investment, education abroad advising and programming will succeed for the greatest number of students if we proactively establish and foster a multi-faceted approach to our student outreach and support.

As we look ahead to what the future will hold, I hope that we can come together again in another 30 years (approximately) and revisit our

experiences and refine our goals for the benefit of all our students. I hope to see you then! ■

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## Sample Resources

### Access Abroad:

<https://umabroad.umn.edu/resources/accessibility-abroad>

**Site-specific Accessibility Categories:** <https://umabroad.umn.edu/resources/identity/disabilities/site-accessibility-abroad>

### Mobility International, USA:

<https://miusa.org/americans-going-abroad/>

### Gallaudet University Human-Center Design in London:

<https://gallaudet.edu/campus-design-facilities/london-adventures-introduce-students-to-human-centered-design/>

### IES Student Resources:

<https://www.iesabroad.org/student-resources/health>

### IFSA-Butler Student Stories:

<https://ifsa-butler.org/ifsa-student-stories/?categories-stories=accommodations-and-accessibility>

# NCDE Milestones and Highlights

1981

Mobility International USA (MIUSA) is founded.



1983

MIUSA publishes *A World of Options*.

1990

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) becomes law.



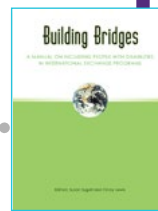
1998

NCDE **Joining Hands Conference** brings together key exchange and disability leaders

NCDE launches first **Campus Collaboration** campaign

1997

NCDE publishes *Building Bridges: A Guide to Including People with Disabilities in International Exchange Programs* and its first *A World Awaits You* journal.



1995

**National Clearinghouse on Disability and Exchange (NCDE)** is established.



1999

NCDE publishes *Rights and Responsibilities: A Guide to National and International Disability-Related Laws for International Exchange Organizations and Participants*

2003

NCDE places **Exchange Pioneer** interns with disabilities at exchange organizations



2009

NCDE holds **Accessing the World through International Exchange Disability Community Seminars** in New York and Berkeley

2008

The **Americans with Disabilities Act Amendments Act (ADAAA)** is signed into law

2014



NCDE conducts a training for the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs

2015

NCDE conducts "U.S. Disability Rights: 25 Years of the ADA and Beyond," U.S. Department of State's Fulbright Foreign Student enrichment seminar

NCDE releases **Passport to Possibilities** video series

NCDE produces first season of **Ripple Effects** podcast

2020

NCDE hosts **Joining Hands Virtual Symposium on International Exchange and Disability**

NCDE launches **Access to Exchange** externship program



2018

NCDE convenes **Joining Hands Symposium** in Washington, DC



2016

**Exchanges for All: Disability in ECA Exchange Program** in Washington, D.C.



2021

NCDE conducts first **Access to Exchange Summer Institute** online course

NCDE and ECA co-host activities celebrating the **75th anniversary of the Fulbright Program**

2024

NCDE announces **Campus Collaboration Initiative**

NCDE selects first cohort of **Global Access Correspondents**

2025



# NCDE celebrates its 30th Anniversary!

# NCDE's Everyday Impact

As a wheelchair user who needs personal assistance, information like this makes me happy...I have always felt that overseas experiences were so far out of my reach and now I know what is possible.

—Person with a disability from the U.S.

I am thrilled to share that I was offered the Watson fellowship this week! I am so grateful for your immense support and wisdom throughout this entire process.

Attending the Access to Exchange Summit this past summer and all your help sharing connections made a world of difference. Thank you so much for helping me access such a transformative opportunity.

—Person with a disability who attended NCDE's Access to Exchange Summit

After talking to NCDE staff and receiving many resources and contacts, I feel confident that we are on the right track to support our visiting international fellows to thrive during their program.

—Senior Project Director of IREX

Thank you so much for the presentation that inspired thought and action in our group. The team is eager to get the resources and make progress. We are very appreciative of your work and the impact that it has in our own shared world, we will do our part to contribute.

—Chief Programs Officer of AFS

We were able to add your information to our web page dedicated to advising students with disabilities who are interested in study abroad, a great resource for our students. We appreciate the services you provide.

—Staff from a DePaul University's Study Abroad Program

I got information about the Regan-Fascell Democracy Fellows Program through the e-newsletter and few other sources. I'm grateful to [NCDE] for creating this very strategic information hub. I've found it very resourceful. I'll keep you informed as things progress.

—International exchange alum with a disability from Nigeria

# Did You Know?

NCDE has responded to thousands of inquiries related to people with disabilities participating in international exchange! Questions come from individuals with disabilities and their networks, international education professionals, and others from the U.S. and around the world! In the early days of NCDE, many of these inquiries would arrive via snail mail to our office in Eugene, Oregon; we sometimes collected the international stamps!



## NCDE's Offerings

Over its 30 years, NCDE has offered free services such as:



Information and referral services to answer questions about navigating overseas travel with a disability, how to begin searching for international exchange opportunities and funding, designing international exchange programs for disability access and more.



An online library of over 200 tip sheets for disabled travelers and international exchange advisors. Whether you need to know how to arrange an accessible homestay, budget for disability access, or arrange disability-related accommodations abroad, we have a tip sheet for that!



Trainings and events to put disability access abroad on any agenda. Our webinars and conference presentations invite a wide array of presenters and perspectives, and NCDE presents the Joining Hands Symposium to stoke “deep dive” discussion.



Skill-building opportunities for exchange alumni with disabilities to explore careers in international exchange through the “Access to Exchange” externship and fellowship programs.



Journals and books that show what’s possible. Our A World Awaits You journal highlights topics like foreign language learners, international students, and global opportunities through community college. Survival Strategies is a must-read book for aspiring travelers with disabilities.



Stories, videos and podcasts to bring exchange experiences to life. Explore our library of traveler stories, Ripple Effects podcast episodes, and Passport to Possibilities videos for candid conversations with disabled exchange alumni about the ups and downs (but mostly ups) of life abroad.

# Roundtable Consortium

NCDE is grateful for the support of its advisory team of influential organizations and institutions responsible for developing and carrying out strategies to accomplish the NCDE's goals. Approximately half of the members are international exchange organizations that promote inbound and/or outbound exchange programming at the secondary, postsecondary, and professional levels, while the other half engage the disability community, specializing in independent living, disability services, and disability rights. Bridging these organizations through the Roundtable results in a cross-pollination of ideas and collaboration among members, who then share best practices for disability-accessible exchange to colleagues throughout both fields. It's a win-win!

## Recent Roundtable Consortium members:

- U.S. Department of State, ECA
- Ability360
- AFS-USA
- AHEAD
- Alliance for International Exchange
- American Association of People with Disabilities (AAPD)
- American Councils for International Education
- CIEE - Council on International Educational Exchange (CIEE)
- Cultural Vistas
- Deaf Worlds
- Disability Rights Education and Defense Fund (DREDF)
- DA Global
- Global Ties U.S.
- Institute for Study Abroad (IFSA)
- Institute of International Education
- IREX
- NAFSA
- National Council on Independent Living (NCIL)
- Partners for Youth with Disabilities
- United States International Council on Disabilities (USICD)
- University of California System, Education Abroad Program
- University of Minnesota, Learning Abroad Center
- World Learning
- 2-Gether International



# Our Mission Matters:

In the Words of International Exchange Alumni with Disabilities

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**I encourage others with disabilities to look for these kinds of educational opportunities because we have the right and the ability to make our dreams come true.**

*—English as a Second Language (ESL) student from Guatemala studying in the U.S.*

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**All my life, people told me my disability would not stop me from doing whatever I wanted to do. Successfully completing a trip abroad allowed me to really believe that.**

*—Disability rights champion and exchange alum from the U.S.*

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**As a person with a disability, I want to show the world how much we can accomplish.”**

*—Teach abroad exchange alum from the U.S.*

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