

FINDING STRENGTH

in Identity



Name:

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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



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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.