

I remember when Mrs. Bernard told me that my application had been accepted. It was during the first day of the PeaceJam conference. Not only was I a mentor, I was a student worker helping organize the event and manage volunteers. It was two days before spring break- at which time I would be co-leading a group of students on a University Ministries immersion trip. I ran into her when I was leaving her office and she told me the decision that had been made. I was so overwhelmed. I hugged her and walked back to the curb so that I could tell my friend I would be joining her on the study abroad trip. I literally ran and tackled her. We jumped up and down and hugged-it was so exciting. I did not know that this experience would change my life.

So much happened to me when I was in Germany. I cannot begin to cover everything I did or everything I learned in only a couple pages, but the two most important things I gained from this experience is my independence and knowledge on how to be healthy. One thing I did not write about in my application and did not discuss with anyone from study abroad, is the fact that I have some medical issues. Most significantly I have a genetic disorder that causes an array of symptoms. Because of this my family and my friends have always hovered over me. Despite being 23 years old, I had never really done anything by myself and the idea of doing such terrified me. The last two weeks of my time in Germany, I was forced to be completely self-reliant. I had to figure out my own transportation, where I was going to sleep, what I was going to eat, where I was going to go... Not only was I completely alone for the first time in my life, I was

completely alone in a foreign country where, by that point, I spoke just enough of the language for a basic conversation; and I survived.

I booked a bus from Berlin to Chemnitz where I visited my friend for a few days. Then I booked a bus to Dresden and stayed for a week in a youth hostel. I woke up and went for a walk and read every morning, I talked and explored Dresden with people from all over the world during the day, and I spent some time every night drawing. That was the most important week of my life. When I got back to the states I had a courage I never felt before. Instead of staying with my parents until I found a job in my field and an apartment I could move into with a friend, I moved to Nashville on my own and got a retail job so I could support myself until I figured out the rest. I am a completely independent adult now, and I am happy.

The second most important thing I gained from this experience is knowing how to be healthy. Due to a combination of my disorder, being sheltered by everyone, and my own laziness, I had never paid attention to any aspect of my health unrelated to the chronic pain my disorder causes. I knew I had negative reactions to certain foods – especially ones with a lot of preservatives and chemicals, but before this trip I just ate whatever until I had a reaction. Then I would take some medicine and forget about it. It started to seem normal that food made me sick. I noticed after the first couple days in Germany that I was not getting sick anymore. I had even eaten some fruit (my nemeses) and I was fine. I started to eat normally because I wasn't afraid to eat or so hungry that I'd eat anything. Because nearly everything I ate over there was organic, there was

nothing in it that gave me a reaction. After the first two weeks I felt healthier than I ever have in my entire life. Even my pain levels seemed to be leveling out because of the healthy eating and regular exercise. I cannot explain what I felt when I was able to go a month without both my pain medication and my allergy medication. It was magical.

To be completely honest, when I applied to the Lumos award, I fully expected nothing to happen. It was two weeks before the deadline when I started the application. I had to find the least busy professors possible (an impossible task) and I had to write what seemed like an autobiography- I am pretty awkward when it comes to talking or writing about myself. I was very stressed and also pretty sick at the time, but for some reason, I became obsessed with needing to get my application in. There were perhaps a hundred other things I could have and should have been doing during those two weeks, but I felt led in a way I never have before. It turned out to be the best thing I have ever done for myself. I made so many friends and had so many experiences that the prospect of writing each one down seems impossible. All I can do is say that every moment I spent there was a dream come true. I am forever changed because of it and no matter where I end up, I will always be able to look back on the amazing times I had. There really is no good way to say thank you for such an experience, except to say I will always be grateful.