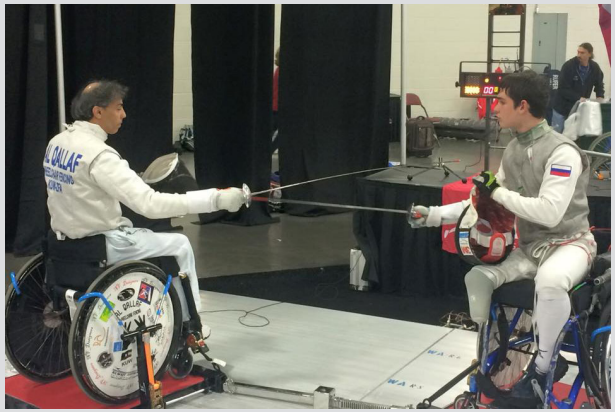

"For as long as I can remember, I've dreamed of traveling to faraway places. I had traveled with my parents to the beach almost every year, but all that time I was thinking that it would be wonderful to sail across the water to a place where people speak a different language, wear different clothes, etc. It made me sad to think that I would never be able to experience this big and amazing world. After all, I have a disability, and my parents also have limited eyesight, so you can imagine that we don't have the resources for such trips.

Nevertheless, I tried to find ways to experience the world from other people's point of view. This is how I learned that there are programs for students to study in another country for one year. I thought that it was a good chance, but everywhere I looked only children without disabilities were shown and I became very interested: could I be selected and go to the U.S.? And when I found out that there was a competition which allowed everyone to participate, I understood that this was my one and only chance. I simply had to try!

And then it all began: I saw two oceans and swam in them, I held in my hand a real baby alligator, I picked oranges in the garden and squeezed them to make my own juice, and I sat around a real Indian bonfire!!! All of this and much more that just can't be put into words! But the most important thing to take from this story – I understand that SOMETIMES DREAMS DO COME TRUE, even the most unbelievable ones." ***- Lyudmila***

"Upon arriving in my American school I saw one boy. He was handicapped and only able to move around in a wheelchair. 'I feel so bad for him,' I told my American friend. 'Why would you feel bad for him?' replied my friend. 'He's happy that he studies with us and that he's able to live a complete and fulfilling life just like the rest of us.' And at that moment, upon realizing that attitude of equal rights and respect towards people for who they are inside, it helped me to dispel the inferiority I felt at being hard of hearing. And after having heard those words of my American friend about the boy in the wheelchair, I immediately understood that I was absolutely just like everyone else and I was overcome with optimism!" ***- Aleksandra***

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2019-2020

FLEX

# ...in their own words

*FLEX alumni with disabilities describe their experiences on program*

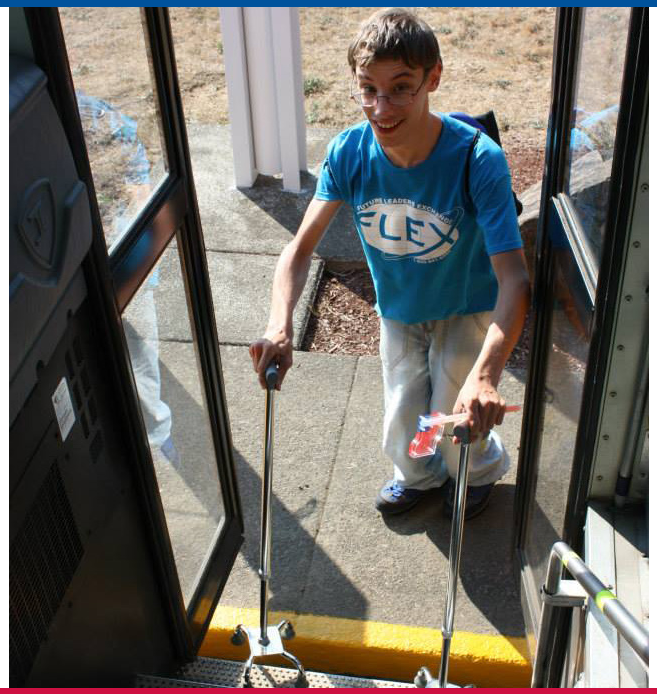
"This trip to America had a very beneficial effect on me. I became more confident in myself and realized that a person's possibilities are unlimited and that nothing is impossible. I experienced many new and exciting feelings, which I used to think were out of reach. In Oregon, where all the exchange students with disabilities gathered upon arriving in the U.S., I (as someone who is completely blind) experienced a feeling of infinite joy.

One month after I arrived in my host family, my coordinator organized a trip for exchange students to the mountains, and I experienced many feelings – I was trembling while grasping the rock ledge, trying not to fall, and joy when after the long battle you are able to make it to the top of the mountain.

Before I was embarrassed to walk with my white cane, but in America because I studied in a school which had both students with and without disabilities, I needed to use my cane since I was the only blind student at school. At first I was embarrassed in front of my peers – I wanted to throw away my cane and walk without it. But in time that feeling passed, and now I walk everywhere with my cane. Additionally, I learned to cook and became familiar with kitchen equipment specially designed for the blind. Thanks to this trip I became more sociable, and now when I am among new people, I am more open." ***- Natalya***

"The first week in U.S. school was a little bit stressful because of my not being used to hearing and studying in English every day, but you get accustomed it after a while. More interesting was the communication with all the new people at school. My school was quite small (about 200 students), so it was very easy for everybody to notice somebody new. I received a warm welcome, teachers and the principal introduced me to the other students during classes and at a school meeting. My peers expressed great interest in my culture and my school back home. They were asking a huge number of questions all the time. I was invited to the Foreign Friends organization and there a bonfire was organized due to my arrival. I could feel how hard they tried to make my stay the best experience ever, and I am very thankful to them." ***- Aziza***

"Before the start of the school year my host family told me many things and introduced me to American culture. According to them, volunteering was a popular activity which many young people did in their spare time. While they are helping their community, they make new friends and socialize. And with this, my family got me interested in helping others in this way. So that I wouldn't miss my beloved dog back home, they decided to take me to volunteer in an animal shelter.

Through these activities I made new friends, learned a lot about American culture and traditions, and just spent my free time purposefully. The number of my volunteer hours grew with every week. At the end of the year I had become so engrossed in volunteering, that I had accumulated 356 hours!" ***- Fayil***

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