

# I AM A GILMAN SCHOLAR

## Amsterdam While Deaf

My name is Ashley Gleason and I am a Gilman Scholar. I graduated from Rochester Institute of Technology with a major in Biomedical Science and a Minor in Women and Gender Studies. I studied abroad in the Netherlands during summer 2019, where I participated in the Institute for the International Education of Students (IES) program: Amsterdam - Society, Culture & Gender.

I was born deaf in both ears and use cochlear implants to help me hear. Even with the cochlear implants, I still need support, such as American Sign Language (ASL) interpreters or captioning in school settings to help me understand what is being said. At first, I was leery about the idea of study abroad. However, I had seen others study abroad while being deaf, which gave me the confidence to try something new. Fortunately, because I went to RIT I had interpreters available to join me for my six weeks in Amsterdam. I consider myself extremely lucky to have such easy access to interpreters that could follow me along in my study abroad adventure.

While getting interpreters was easy for me, I still had to make other arrangements myself. I contacted my program to find deaf-friendly fire alarms and alarm clocks for my apartment. I had to advocate for myself with my teachers overseas, as it was their first time working with ASL interpreters. I also applied for and received a disability grant through my program.

My study abroad experience went smoothly, except for the first few days. The start of my program was a big transition for me as I adapted to a new learning environment and informed people around me about my disability and my accommodation needs. Those first few days took a lot of energy out of me, but soon after things fell into a normal routine. I had such an incredible time with my peers, professors, and interpreters – my friends even learned a little bit of sign language! I was so fortunate to have great interpreters that would come with me to dinners and side trips to provide access.

After my program finished, I did some traveling on my own in Italy, where I didn't have my interpreters with me. However, I found that traveling on my own while deaf isn't too different from traveling while hearing. I noticed that a lot of people in Europe are used to multilingual speakers and gesturing. I found people to be more likely to accommodate communication issues simply because of Europe's multiculturalism. I was able to communicate through gestures, speaking, and Google Translate. I conquered a fear of mine (traveling alone) and everything went well (except for a quick detour to Pisa when I should've been going to Venice!).

Overall, my experience abroad as a Gilman Scholar was an amazing one, and my being deaf didn't impact studying abroad much because I had resources and used them. However, I do recognize the privilege I have of using cochlear implants and readily-available ASL interpreters, as these resources are not easily accessible to everyone. If I were to give advice to other deaf or disabled students planning to study abroad, I would say start your research early! Get in touch with your college's disability services office, look for any potential disability grants, and reach out to the host country program to make as many arrangements as possible in advance. Getting everything set into place beforehand makes studying abroad a lot less stressful.