

Madison Watts

Gilman Program Alumni Ambassador
Kyrgyzstan, 2022



“My Gilman Program experience reinforced my belief that studying foreign languages is incredibly important to building mutual understanding across the world.”

Madison studied abroad as a Gilman scholar in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, during the fall of 2022 through the SRAS Russian as a Second Language program. Her time in Kyrgyzstan enabled her to pursue her interest in learning about different cultures and her passion for learning languages. This was significant as Madison had never traveled outside the United States or even flown on a plane, but she was able to fulfill her dream of studying abroad and immerse herself in a new part of the world. The immersive experience also enabled her to strengthen her Russian language skills as she was taking courses and engaging with the local community. She volunteered at the Bishkek American Space sponsored by the U.S. Embassy, where she helped locals practice and perfect their English-speaking skills while having invaluable conversations about the similarities and differences between the two cultures and educating against stereotypes.

Madison is glad that she studied abroad in a “non-traditional” location. Kyrgyzstan not only provided a more immersive language experience for her as there were not as many English speakers there but also led to extremely meaningful conversations with the locals about the United States and American culture, as many Americans do not travel to Central Asia. She was asked many questions about the United States and the culture, which made her think differently about how people outside the United States view Americans. She was able to see the beauty in the nonhomogeneous society in the United States that she had previously taken for granted.

Madison is a senior at the University of Tennessee-Knoxville, where she studies global studies-language, politics, and culture as well as Russian language and literature. She is a senior student assistant at the International House on campus and the president of the Russian Language and Culture Club. She is excited to be a Gilman Alumni Ambassador and to help students learn about the variety of study or internship abroad options. She is especially excited to speak with students who want to study a critical need language as that language skill creates countless opportunities to open discussion with people in parts of the world that would like to know more about the United States, allowing Americans to be better citizen diplomats while abroad.

- Hometown: Sweetwater, Tennessee
- Pursuing a Bachelor of Arts in global studies-language, politics, and culture and in Russian language and literature at the University of Tennessee-Knoxville
- Senior student assistant at the University of Tennessee-Knoxville Center for Global Engagement
- Received a Gilman Critical Need Language Award to study Russian

