

E20 - CBYX | Accessibility in Germany | Navigating Germany with a Disability

Host: Hanni Geist | podcast@daad.org

Listen at <https://soundcloud.com/coffeeconnections> or wherever you listen to podcasts.

Download selected transcripts at <https://www.daad.org/en/about-us/who-we-are/podcast/>.



[00:00:09.41]

Hanni Geist (HG): Today's episode highlights the perspective of a student with disabilities studying abroad in Germany. My name is Hanni Geist. Welcome to Coffee Connections. Today's coffee connection is Michelle She, CBYX High School program alumna, teacher of students with the visual impairments and disabilities advocate. Have a listen.

[00:00:28.77]

Michelle She (MS): Hi, my name is Michelle She and I'm currently a teacher of the visually impaired with D.C. Public Schools here in Washington, D.C. I went to Germany with the 2012/2013, I believe it's been so long ago, for CBYX program. It's called the Congress Bundestag Youth Exchange Program or PPP¹. And yeah, I went as a high school student, so right after I graduated as my gap year and it started out because I saw my friend who was going to study abroad in Japan, and I thought it was so cool and I wanted to study abroad too. And I didn't even know it was an option, you know, until she went. And then she told me, no, you can apply to and you can apply to any country that you want. And, you know, I looked at the website that

¹ <https://exchanges.state.gov/us/program/congress-bundestag-youth-exchange>

had the tuition on it and I said, I can't afford any of this. And, you know, my parents are very traditional and they don't really believe in, in pap years or in studying abroad. And so they said, no, like, you can't we don't we're not going to pay for this. So if you want to go, you find your own way. So luckily, the U.S. government and German government has these partnerships. And so I decided to apply and I applied in secret.

[00:01:43.11] HG: How did you find out about that?

[00:01:44.73] MS: So originally I was applying for NSLI-Y² and I was applying to go to China 'cause my parents are from China and, you know, I know how to speak Chinese. And during the application process, the person called me just like, why are you applying to China? You already know how to speak Chinese. And, you know, so why don't you apply for something else? And I was like, what other, you know, what other options are there? She goes: well, there's Germany, you know. Oh, ok. Well, let's try that. And I think because I also have a disability, so my parents were, you know, China is not very disability friendly. And when they heard Germany, I think they were more relieved.

You know, it's like ok, you can go to a developed [country].

HG: So was that the first time you actually considered ..., like Germany was on your radar? Or have you had an exposure to maybe German culture, German language prior to that? Or was that the first time and you just jumped to opportunity and went for it?

[00:02:44.55]

MS: Yeah, that was that was the first time. And before the CBYX opportunity came up, I also heard about the YES, the YES program³, which sends you to Muslim countries. And I was like, oh, I want to go to Africa, I want to go to Indonesia. And my parents are like, no. And my grandpa used to be a captain. So he sailed the season and went everywhere. And he would always just say that he had a really good impression of Germany, because back when China was poor, he would say that a lot of other countries have tried to rip China off. But he said Germany was very professional and, you know, whatever was discussed was the way it is. And so you never had an issue in Germany. And he enjoyed that place a lot.

² <https://www.nsliforyouth.org/>

³ <https://www.yesprograms.org/>

[00:03:25.90]

HG: I have a few follow up questions, but I do have to ask: You have cerebral palsy, is that correct?

MS: Yeah.

HG: And so, I've heard the term, but I'm not really familiar with it, would you just describe how that affects your life and then also specifically how it was for you then going abroad and maybe the questions that you had and kind of what to consider before going.

[00:03:53.67]

HG: So cerebral palsy is sort of just like a brain, a neuro ... something that happens in my central nervous system, basically. And for me, it's that my left leg was influenced, actually, both my legs were influenced, but it's more so on the left side and my balance is very poor. My muscles are tight, so it's hard for me to walk down the stairs, especially without a rail. I can't walk up and down stairs without a rail. I know there's some people with cerebral palsy who have a more severe case. You know, we are on a spectrum, and they may need a wheelchair, but currently I don't use any walking aids.

[00:04:30.27]

HG: What did you have to consider in going to Germany and how was the experience for you?

MS: I really did not know what to expect 'cause I had no exposure to Germany. I just knew it was a developed country. And so I just crossed my fingers and hoped that it would be accessible. Throughout my experience, I was in touch with both the German side and the American side.

You know, I was calling them and said: 'I need rails to access places. Will I be able to? What is it going to be like after I get off the plane? Where are we going to go? What's the host families house like?'

Because I want to be able to navigate it. They were very accommodating with that, especially if you give them clear explanations of what you need and what is difficult for you. I think Germans in particular are very good at finding solutions.

[00:05:30.72]

HG: How did you find navigating Germany and what was your experience like? Just in general. I mean, you didn't know anything about Germany at all. So tell me a little bit more about your experience.

[00:05:43.62]

MS: Yeah. So in the beginning, we had like a one month of a crash course for language because, you know, some people went there knowing some of the language and some people went there knowing none of it. And we were put in Zelle, it's in Lower Saxony. I did not expect in my family was living in a rural area. It was so it was very rural. Yeah. And then my second host family was near there and it was also extremely rural, like they had a farm and everything. And so for me, like in a way it was easier to navigate because there's nothing around you. Nothing to, you know, really get in your way. But at the same time, it was just sometimes the roads were not always paved, you know, like in terms of the balance. It was a little more difficult. But I would say there was a bus stop right outside of our house. So I didn't really have a lot of issues. And I don't know what it is in Germany, but their busses drive very well. I saw the Mercedes Benz and I was like, you know, what happens in the US, I get on even before I sit down they've already started driving away and it's all bumpy. But in Germany, I never had that problem, really, and they would always wait for me to sit down. I just told them, like, hey, I have this problem.

[00:07:04.03]

HG: And so you communicated with them in German? Especially since you didn't know any German at the beginning?

MS: Yeah, it was still in German. I just had my dictionary, because especially in places that are not the big cities, I realized that a lot of them still actually prefer to speak German or they might not even know English, especially the older generation. And they get upset when I spoke English. I was like, oh, I need to speak German.

HG: Yeah, that's always the recommendation I give that if someone really wanted to learn German, then I say, don't go to the big cities, go to those small towns, because that's where you really learn the language, because in Germany and Berlin, for example, so many people speak English. For someone who wants to learn German, sometimes that's actually quite hard.

MS: Yes, I agree. Like when I went to Berlin, I didn't go to Berlin that many times, but I was there for the Berlin Film Festival, 'cause I wanted to see what it was like. And I swear, I did not hear a single word of German.

HG: Well in particular, the Berlin Film Festival is extremely international. So many people from all over the world come.

So I actually wanted to ask you, because yesterday I did speak with Blake Goodman, who's the chairman of CBYX Alumni Association. So yesterday actually did already talk to someone who participated in the program where they also do an internship. So what was the year like for you? You had this one month of intensive German and then what kind of program did you have afterwards?

[00:08:41.38]

MS: So I think CBYX they have two different types of programs. One is for the high school side and the other one is for more of the college students or the more intensive internship. So I basically just went to high school like, you know, other high schoolers. Basically, they just stuck me into a class. I had German with seventh graders and then I had all my other classes with 11th graders. So it was a good mix. And then because that school had a program where you could have a month of internship, I was able to get a one month internship at a Montessori school. And that was also a very good experience because, you know, I was around kids all the time and so I could understand their German.

HG: So how was it for you if you only just for a month learned German in a really intense crash course and then you were just thrown into the water so to say?

MS: Yeah, it was it was difficult, especially because then they put you directly into a Gymnasium⁴ and I was like that, I'm not ready. But and, you know, they'll sometimes they just put you where they have space. So if it's an honors course where they space, then you end up in that, and I can say it was it was extremely difficult. Like the first four months, I was literally just sitting there and not understanding a whole lot. But then, it was kind of just like one day after four months, it just started clicking and then everything started to make sense. And then I could, you know, look things up with a dictionary and the students are nice, too. They'll help

⁴ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gymnasium_\(Germany\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gymnasium_(Germany))

you. And so it ended up working out. And that by the end of the year, I was able to, like, give presentations in German and obviously not that great [...].

HG: Wow. But still, that's amazing. After just one year learning German to do that. I remember I did that in English after learning many, many years. But it was hard then. But with only the year German, that's extraordinary.

MS: I think that's just like the benefits of living with a host family. You hear German all day long and it really helps. I mean, now it's been quite a while and I haven't spoken German very often since, but I can still understand quite a bit of it because it just it kind of almost never leaves.

HG: Yeah. I would assume once you go back it probably takes a little bit, but then you'd be able to use it again.

MS: Yeah. I think that's what is very cool about languages. It's almost like swimming, you know, like you kind of have that muscle memory there.

HG: On the MIUSA website you have a blog entry about your experience. And you did talk about your parents and convincing them. I'm curious, can you talk a little bit more about that, especially for a student with disabilities, I assume your parents had a few had a few concerns. So how did you talk to them about going abroad? Because the parents, of course, always are part of the process. But I assume for someone with disabilities, maybe even more involved and the parents may have even more questions. So what is your experience with that?

MS: Yeah, so I think that blog post was when MIUSA interviewed my parents. So they ... it was tough to persuade them. When they found out that I was going to the interviews, obviously, I was like, you know 'can you drive me to the interviews?', because I can't drive, they were like 'you did what?'. And they were also ...

HG: You didn't even tell them that you applied?

MS: No, I didn't tell them I applied until I made it to the interview.

HG: So this is this future Michelle's problem? Like 'If I get the interview, I'm going to talk to them'?

MS: Yeah. They went they drove me there and nobody else's parents were there. You know, it's just the just the kids and my parents. They just kept sitting there and they were bombarding the judges and everyone with questions, and they asked alumni questions like 'What's Germany like?', 'Is it ok if she goes?', 'Is the host family going to be safe?' So they asked a lot of questions. And I think by the end of it, they were like, 'Ok, you know what? We think it's ok'. But there was a portion where they had to write a family recommendation letter. And so my dad wrote the worst recommendation letter on the planet. He was very direct and honest, he was just like 'My daughter can't do this, my daughter can't do that [...]'. I didn't even see the letter. The AFS people called me and they were like 'By the way, like, you got in'. And I was like 'What?', I was so shocked. And I read my parents letter. I was like, I don't know why they picked me. Because based off of what my parents said.

HG: What did they say?

[00:13:49.94]

MS: They just made it sound like I was extremely not independent, that, like, I can't go down the stairs, that I can't... you know what I mean? It is just very basic things that people like you should be able to do. But they just said that I couldn't do these things, or sorry if you have to deal her and all of this. But now that I look back, I think that it was almost beneficial because they knew what they were getting into, you know, like the worst case scenario. So I think because Germans are very realistic and like, ok, if we take her like we know this is what we're getting into. Because, you know, when AFS⁵ processes everyone who's there, it's the parent - the host family who gets to come see your picture. They see what kinds of activities you are into and then they choose you based on that. Then they get your whole record, including like your grades, everything that you've submitted ever to AFS. So I think they really get a whole picture view of who you are.

HG: Did you end up needing any additional support or any kind of accommodations or were you able to just navigate the space as it was?

⁵ www.afsusa.org/study-abroad/scholarships/cbyx/

MS: I was able to navigate this space as it was. I would say that in Germany, I've noticed that some of the stairs are steeper, where they have these holes, you know, there it's like holes in between [stairs]. That was a little more difficult. But there were rails. Rails are in the house. And so that wasn't much of an issue.

HG: And then I hope you also got to travel in Germany.

MS: Yes. I actually traveled a lot.

HG: So where did you go in Germany?

MS: Hamburg, Hannover, Wolfsburg, Goslar. Where else? It was so many places. Leipzig. Back then, there was this service called *Mitfahrgelegenheit*. We would just use that instead of the *Bahn* (German for train) and you would be able to get really cheap prices.

HG: Can you explain what that is, *Mitfahrgelegenheit*?

MS: *Mitfahrgelegenheit*, it's almost like a rideshare program, kind of like Uber and Lyft, but they go longer distances. And I think it's mostly, you know, they carpool to help the environment.

HG: And they I don't think they get paid, right? Well, a little bit to help with the gas.

MS: Yeah. And so at first when I told my parents I was going to use this, they're like 'oh, my god, is this safe?' ...

HG: ... getting in a stranger's car.

MS: And I was like 'Well, why not?' It's one fifth the price of a *Bahn* ticket. And I met some of the nicest people and most accommodating people there. They were so nice. And because, you know, sometimes they would drive two, three people, four people at a time, you would end up making friends and you have people to talk to during the car ride. So it was very nice. And I every time I went to Berlin, I went with *Mitfahrgelegenheit*. I think they changed it to BlaBlaCar now.

HG: So what is your favorite city in Germany and why?

[00:17:02.98]

MS: So I really like Berlin. I know it's such a cliché answer, but I think it's just because of how accessible it really was. And also, I lost my wallet twice in Germany, and one time it was in Berlin. And I was just like 'You know what? This is a lost cause. I'm never going to find it.' But they found my wallet in under 24 hours ...

HG: Oh, wow!

MS: Yeah, and they gave it back to me and everything was intact.

HG: When you say that it's accessible. What does it really mean for you specifically?

[00:17:34.81]

MS: I think for me, that's just a very walkable city and a very well paved city. So I can imagine that, you know, someone with a wheelchair would be definitely able to navigate on their own. And for me, was also a lot of curb cuts because it's hard for me to step off that curb. Even when the curb was higher, there was usually like some kind of rail or something there that I could kind of lean against to go down.

I mean, I might look a little weird, but it is just, you know...

HG: Oh, who cares!

MS: Yeah. I can get where I need to go.

HG: I'm glad that we speak, because as someone who ... I can just walk and I don't have any physical disabilities. You don't really think like someone who, who does need some accommodation. So it's always interesting for me to have that perspective and to also see where there is still work to do. So asking that, what are things maybe that still needs to be improved for you to have an even better experience?

MS: I would say there's a lot of more older buildings that they've preserved. Especially like a *Schloss* (castle) or museums. I think most museums now are pretty renovated. But the school that I went to was actually in an old *Schloss*, and the stairs were ...

HG: ... probably very pretty, but not very accessible.

MS: Yeah. It was so pretty on the outside. I was expecting that if I walk through, you know, it would be accessible, but it was difficult and the floors creaked and everything.

And sometimes there were random stairs. So I also have a visual impairment. I have glaucoma. And part of my field is missing. And so, like, for example, if I look up, I might not actually see that there's a stair there. And I imagine for people with wheelchairs, it's all the same thing with their wheelchairs on a different height. And there's like a random step there. Then, you know, people can, if they keep on going forward, their wheelchair is going to flip.

[00:19:42.22]

HG: So how did you navigate the school? And it does it does sound like it's very pretty, but not very accessible at all.

MS: It was slow when you got into the school. It was hard to get in. But then once you got up to the floor with all the classrooms, they were just typically next to each other. So that wasn't too difficult. But it's getting into the school and getting out of the school was a struggle that would just take a lot longer than other people.

HG: So your experience, how did that affect you personally, but then also professionally?

MS: One of the things is ... so first, sustainability is a very big thing in Germany. And, you know, I didn't know that, you know, I had to sort my trash even before I went to Germany. And my host family was so eco-friendly. They always got so upset if I didn't sort my trash. So that's one thing that I think they kind of just hammered in.

[00:20:42.34]

HG: And they are not just two different ones like here in the U.S.. Oftentimes when there is recycling, there are four or five, six different ways to recycle, too.

MS: Yes. And sometimes in the US, I just saw this the other day and I don't understand, but they have different, you know, different bins or holes you put it in, but it goes in the same trash bag. So essentially, you think you're recycling, but you're actually not. And I think in Germany there

was one time when I really didn't know where to throw some things. I just threw it in any bin. And I got yelled at by an elderly woman. Good thing they did back when I was in high school, you know. I was still young because I think now if I did that, it would be, you know, even more embarrassing. But I think it really taught me the importance of recycling. And now, if I don't recycle, it's kind of like a reflex by now. And if I don't recycle, I get kind of annoyed, like where do I put this?'

So that's one thing.

My host family, the host mom, was a foster parent, she was a social worker. So I actually grew up with a bunch of foster care kids and just seeing, like, how she interacted with these kids and kind of took them in as her own. That really influenced me, too. And, you know, for the longest time, I wanted to work in orphanages and stuff like that. So it was a good experience, too.

HG: How many of those kids were there?

MS: When I was there, it was three. And it was just 24/7, those kids stay with her all the time. And I think she would get like a certain, you know, a little part of her salary would go towards taking care of these children, bring them places. And so wherever these kids went, I got the chance to go, too. So it was nice to tag along. And then I remember one time I had to go to the doctor's office and get medicine and stuff like that. And I saw that the medicine had Braille on it. It had accessible stuff on it, you know. And if I told them I couldn't get it, like if I couldn't go there to get it, they drove the medicine to my house. So just in general, I saw that, you know, people were very accommodating. They really tried their best.

HG: Is that not a case here [in the U.S.]? Well, I get my prescriptions usually from CVS and yes, there is no Braille on that, is that usually the case here in the US?

[00:23:10.83]

MS: Yeah, I haven't seen a lot of medication with Braille on it.

HG: Which would seem extremely important!

MS: Yes, because all the boxes and the bottles are the same. And I think now they obviously they have the free delivery with CVS and everything and I'm assuming that's going to stay,

because now especially with the corona virus and everything, I think back then in 2012, 2011, that it wasn't really heard of as much, you know?

HG: And then professionally? How did that experience in Germany influence your career?

[00:23:48.06]

MS: So I work with students who are visually impaired. You know, with special education and oftentimes we don't have a lot of funding for things that we need. We really have to cut through a lot of red tape to get where we want to go. And I think that being in Germany, studying abroad and all of that just really helped me see, like to never give up, you know, to keep on going for what you need, because eventually you will get it. It just might take a longer. But I know, like in Germany, I just learned to be very persistent and to communicate because, you know, in the beginning I would try to, especially at school, I would try to hide my disability. And I found that that was a terrible mistake because, you know, my disability is not super obvious, but it's not completely hidden either. And I think maybe because my parents are just used to seeing my disability that they go immediately 'don't walk like that, you need to walk better'. You know what I mean? But for people who don't see me all the time, they may not realize that I have a disability. And so I think for a while, a bunch of people were like, 'why are you stopping at the top of the stairs? Why are you doing [certain things]?' You know what I mean? Like, they'll just look at you like 'what's wrong' type of thing. So I think it's very important to disclose it, especially when you're studying abroad so that people can accommodate you in the best way.

HG: And then once you had this conversation, how was that for you? And maybe also in comparison to the United States, maybe the conversations that you would have at home?

MS: So I found in general, they [Germans] are very understanding and they're not like super invasive about your personal life. I would just say 'Oh, by the way, I have this disability in my balance is bad, so I might need help with this'. And they were like 'ok', and then they wouldn't really ask me any more questions. They would just say 'Just let me know if you need help'. Whereas in the US, I feel like you tell them and they're more likely to ask more like 'oh what caused it?' I think it's out of the goodness of their heart, I would say, you know, but sometimes they try to help and then they help in a way that you don't necessarily need them to help. And so I think that is one of the biggest differences is that in Germany, they kind of expect you to

just advocate for yourself. You know, like if you need it, then you say it. And I expect that what you say is what you mean. So I'll just do as you say type of thing.

[00:26:26.76]

HG: What do you say for other students with disabilities? What would have helped you more in preparation of studying abroad then and then also being in Germany? You said you did communicate with the organization in the US and also in Germany, but what other ways would there be that would have made your experience even better?

MS: I think in terms of disability, I just I never really even reached out to any disability organizations in Germany. You know, I just reached out to my study abroad organization. I think that if I was able to connect with the disability organizations over there in Germany, I think it would help me a lot. And it would help me be exposed to more people with disabilities and Germany, because honestly, I did not see that many.

So if I could redo it, that's what I would do. I would go and get connected with them to see what resources are available.

HG: Is there something, like a fun story or something that you find important, something that you would like to share that I didn't ask yet?

MS: So it's not really like a fun story, but I think a lot of Americans don't realize that when they go to the doctor, because I had to go to the doctors a few times, they don't realize that you have to, like, take off your shirt for the doctor. And so a lot of my friends were like 'What?'. A lot of the people who are studying abroad with me, whenever we were sharing during the halftime camp, they were always like 'Why do we have to take off our shirts? I thought they didn't know what they were going to do.'

And I think it's little things like this, you know, that I feel like Germans are less ashamed of their body. You know, they're just like, this is the body. If you see these things on TV it's just normal. Like everyone has a body type. Whereas I feel in the US it's more sexualized, it's more you know, people are more afraid to talk about things even if they're important, you know.

[00:28:25.73]

HG: So I don't know if you know. But in the GDR specifically and I'm from East Berlin, nude beaches were super normal. I mean, you still see them now. But so this is what I grew up with.

So for me, it was very normal. Of course, as a teenager, I was extremely uncomfortable and I didn't do it. But I don't have an issue to show myself, but I know with American female friends, they wouldn't even change clothes in front of me. I'm like 'your good friend, why not?'

MS: Yeah. That is especially in high schools in the US, you know, we have gyms. You'll have to change. In middle schools like when they're starting to have puberty and that's when we start having gym class where you have a locker room and everything. And I just remember some people would change in the bathroom. I think, you know, because my parents are from China, we have acupuncture clinics. We have a bunch of saunas; that's part of the eastern medicine. So to me, it was like 'what's the problem?' You know what I mean?

HG: But, yeah, I would always say this is just too much time to think about that. And then to go somewhere else is like, if I just do it quickly, I'm done and I can focus on.

MS: Yeah.

HG: What is it that you miss about Germany? Is there something that you miss?

MS: I think I miss the directness, to be honest. In the beginning, it was something that I really had to get used to. I would think 'omg, this person does not have any tact, like it's so rude', but now I realize, like, it's not rude. It's just saving time and getting your message across.

HG: Well, you always know where you're at with a German. I mean, I am German and there is certainly a time and place for directness. And sometimes it's better to not have it. But overall, I do prefer that the straight answers and you know what to expect.

So last question. For someone who has a disability, what do you suggest as the first steps to take and maybe things to consider if they are interested in study abroad or intern abroad?

MS: If you know you're paying for it, then you'd reach out to the organization, or, for example, reach out to MIUSA they have some very good connections.

HG: I know what MIUSA is, but for someone who's not familiar with MIUSA, can you just briefly explain what it is and what they do?

[00:31:00.95]

MS: Yeah, it's Mobility International U.S.A. and they're an organization that encourages travel and exchange for people with mobility disabilities. They hold a lot of different, you know, webinars. They have very good information on their website. You can reach out to Ashley Holben. Yeah, she's very helpful. If you connect with her on LinkedIn, she can connect other people who would be helpful to talk to. They have connections, you know, all over the world. So whichever country you're interested in, I'm sure there'll be someone.

HG: Yeah. Thanks to Ashley [Holben], we also got connected and I'm happy that we did get the chance to speak.

If someone wanted to ask more, get in touch with you, how would they do that best?

MS: Yeah. So I think the best way would just be to email me. My email is michellexshe@gmail.com.

HG: This was my coffee connection with Michelle, she for more information for students with disabilities wishing to go abroad. Visit my youth said work. That's m I use a dork. All content is created and edited by me. Honey, guys, if you would like to get in touch, send an email to podcast@daad.org. Stay safe, healthy and well. Thanks for listening. I'll catch you at the next coffee break.