

# One Path

# Many

Five success stories with one important thing in common:

**STUDY ABROAD**

By Kim Fernandez

Two senior diplomats, a widely published journalist, a CEO, and a pair of renowned architects—successful people all. The common denominator in the five profiles here was a study abroad experience that opened these individuals up to a wider world and new perspectives.



# Destinations

## Where Are the Other Wheelchairs?

Susan Sygall, Founder, Mobility International

**IN 1975**, Susan Sygall was a student at the University of California, Berkeley, reading the school newspaper, with no idea her life was about to change.

“I was reading the paper and saw an ad that said I could study abroad with all expenses paid, to be an ambassador of goodwill for the rotary club,” she says. “I thought that sounded exciting, so I applied and got the award, and studied for a year at the University of Queensland in Australia.”

She came home after that year with all the typical stories of hitchhiking to other areas of the country and traveling across borders aboard boats and planes to see the world, but also with a burning question.

Why had she been one of only three students with wheelchairs at the entire university?

“The other two wheelchair riders were Australian students,” she says today. “I asked myself

the question—where are the other people with disabilities, and why aren’t more people with disabilities able to have this type of study experience?”

Her time in Australia, she says, was life-changing. “In between semesters, a friend and I got to hitchhike through New Zealand for six weeks,” she says. “We took overland buses to Malaysia and Thailand and Bali. I thought it was quite an amazing experience.”



Susan Sygall

That was for more than one reason, she says. “When I was traveling around, especially through Malaysia, I got to meet various people with disabilities,” she says. “I realized that even though we all came from different parts of the world, we were also part of a common family. We all face discrimination. We all have dreams and aspirations of what the world would be like if that weren’t true. I thought we should meet together and share what we know so that people in all countries have their rights, and that I wanted to work to be sure that people with disabilities

were included in all existing [study abroad] programs, but also wanted to run my own program that focused on leadership for people with disabilities.”

She returned home, finished up her studies, including a master’s degree in therapeutic recreation from the University of Oregon, and in 1981, launched Mobility International USA, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit that works to ensure that people with disabilities have the same chance Sygall did to travel and study abroad.

Starting an organization was not exactly foreign to Sygall, who’d launched a recreational sports program for students with disabilities at Berkeley several years prior; it still runs today as the Berkeley Outreach and Recreation Program. Her new focus came from wanting to share her amazing overseas experiences with other people with disabilities who hadn’t thought that kind of thing might be possible for them.

“I didn’t really think about it,” she admits of her own traveling in college. “This was what I wanted to do and that was the

Susan Sygall during the 2010 Women's Institute on Leadership and Disability, which brought together 54 women activists with disabilities from 43 countries.



done this." For example, she notes that many brochures intended to invite students to participate in education abroad include a diverse set of students in their photos, "but do they also think about including someone on their brochure who is blind or in a wheelchair?"

"We really want to change the image of who an exchange student is, and that includes those who could be Fulbright

people or Peace Corps people or what have you. I want to see them recruiting disabled people the way they do everyone else. I'd love to see the next generation of young people, no matter what their disability, thinking this is something they could do," She says.

"I've backpacked with a backpack on my wheelchair in Europe," she says. And that story has led to others.

"One of my favorite stories was of a woman several years ago. She was about 17 and had broken her back in an accident, and was a paraplegic. We visited her in the hospital with this opportunity of an exchange program to Germany or another country. So we approached her while she was in the rehab center, and she said it sounded great. Literally, two or three weeks after being in rehab, she was getting her passport ready to go on an international exchange. She realized she could do it."



Susan Sygall in Cinque Terra, Italy, circa 1998

## From Muskegon to Moscow

**John Beyrle**  
U.S. Ambassador to Russia

**GROWING UP** in Muskegon, Michigan, in the 1960s, John Beyrle heard of no one who traveled to the then-Soviet Union, much less any young people who went there to study. But when the opportunity presented itself to him, he couldn't say no.

Beyrle says he took his first French class in high school, where, about a week into the school year, his teacher pulled him aside after class. "She told me I had a rare gift for language," he remembers. "I can't take any credit for it—my brain is just wired that way." By the time he graduated, he was proficient in both French and German, and entered community college thinking he'd study to be a foreign language teacher. His first college professor also noticed his gift for language, and encouraged him to both branch out into more difficult tongues, and go abroad—as soon as he could. Which he did, traveling to Fribourg, Switzerland in 1972 with a group of students from Northwestern Michigan University, using both his French and German to communicate with a host family.

"I had a chance to speak both languages, and the trip really opened up an entirely new world to me," he says. "That world didn't seem strange or alien or frightening to me."

He returned home and enrolled at Grand Valley State University, where he majored in French, minored in German, and started looking for a third language to learn.

budget I had, and I started traveling. I adapted and made it happen."

But others aren't so adventurous, and might need some help to overcome either their own preconceived ideas about study abroad or those of the people around them. To date, more than 2,000 people from 100 countries have participated in Mobility International USA programs.

"I think it's important," she says of the chance to study abroad. "You understand your own country and your own value system better by being outside of it for awhile. I was coming from the disability rights community at Berkeley, so to see it at a time when things were just starting in Australia was eye-opening. It's very different living in a place for a year than going somewhere for 10 days, and there's an amazing switch that happens."

That switch, she says, is a good thing for fostering a sense of independence.

"In the beginning, you miss your friends at home," she says. "And then it switched for me, and I felt very at home in Australia and made friends there. I almost had to deal with re-entry when I came home. I felt like I had embraced the Australian way of life, and I had to regroup to come back to the U.S."

That's something she works to share with others who have disabilities.

"There are more people with disabilities now getting Fulbrights," she says. "They are going on exchanges and volunteering in other countries. But there is not yet the number I think there could be. Part of the reason is that we're only now seeing stories about people who've

"I received very good advice from a dynamic professor of Russian, who told me if I learned that language, I'd be able to read Tolstoy and Dostoevsky in their original forms. So I started taking Russian my sophomore year and by the time I finished and graduated with French and German, I'd decided I really wanted to do Russian."

After graduating, he was accepted by the Middlebury Summer Language Program, where he signed up for the Council on International Educational Exchange (CIEE). Before long, he and 29 other students were on a plane to Leningrad (now St. Petersburg).

"We lived in Russian dorms and had Russian roommates," Beyrle says. "Really, for me it was the eye-opener that got me started on the road to this career. I was fascinated by the language and literature, but I became more interested in the politics of the Soviet Union, which was a nuclear superpower and had this great space program, but couldn't keep fresh fruit in its stores and had people lined up around the block to buy toilet paper. I knew it was going to take me awhile to figure out what was going on here."

Even then, he knew what a unique opportunity he'd been given.

"There were very, very few programs like this at the time," he says. "Only a handful went there then, compared to the thousands of students who are able to travel to and study in Russia now. The Soviet Union was a very different time—we were ideological rivals, the cold war was strong, and the chance to get into it all and get a real sense of what was happening in the Soviet Union was unique and exotic, in a way. We used to joke about our dorm rooms being bugged or were our roommates working part-time for the KGB as spies."



John Beyrle

But after a year, he learned of an opportunity for Russian-speaking American students to work in Russia, as guides for a traveling exhibit of American photography.

"It was part of a cultural agreement from the 1960s," he says. "Russian-speaking American students acted as guides for this exhibit, spending six or seven months traveling to three different Soviet cities demonstrating these cameras and the photography and a whole range of things." He applied, got the job, and was soon on his way back to the USSR. And that, he says, is what started him on the path to diplomacy.

"Russians would line up around the block to see the exhibits and meet the American students," he says. "That's where I really learned to speak Russian. You're working for six hours a day, standing on the floor of the exhibit, talking to Russians. It is the most intensive language laboratory experience you can imagine. I learned the subtle ways they said things, and I started understanding how they thought, how they formed arguments."

He finished his year and returned home, intending to earn a graduate degree in Slavic linguistics at the University of Michigan.

But after a year, he learned of an opportunity for Russian-speaking American students to work in Russia, as guides for a traveling exhibit of American photography.

"Students from the Young Communist League would come in a group and while they wouldn't heckle us, they'd definitely pummel us with questions," he continues. "There'd be a lot of follow-ups—were we provocateurs, were we spies? We learned about crowd dynamics and how to get a crowd on your side, and along the way I got a very good feel for the language."

The exhibitions were sponsored by the U.S. embassy, and Beyrle says he got an understanding for the role of an ambassador and the embassy during his time there.

"When I returned from the exhibit, I'd planned to go home to finish graduate school," he says. "But a bunch of us took the Foreign Service exam on a lark. I passed it and got a job there."

That, as they say, was that. Beyrle worked in foreign service from then on, taking a year-long sabbatical to earn his master's degree in strategic studies from the National Defense University in Washington D.C., and was appointed Ambassador to Russia in 2008. He says his trips abroad in college were pivotal to the way things worked out.

"I grew up in a small town in Michigan," he says. "I thought I'd be a language teacher just like the teachers I saw every day. And I went to college and went overseas for the first time, and that changed my life. I could function in an 'alien environment' which didn't feel strange to me at all."

The experiences have stuck with him.

"I don't think a day goes by, now that I'm living in Moscow, whether as an ambassador or a businessman that I don't think about it," he says. "Anybody who lived in and experienced life in the USSR and comes back to live and work in the Russian Federation sees that it's a much more free and open society. They're still working through some of the consequences of the changes, but you're struck, every single day, by the differences."

## Discovering the Soul of an Architect Abroad

Steven and Cathi House  
House and House Architects

**SAN FRANCISCO ARCHITECTURE FIRM** House and House has long won awards and praise from experts for its innovative home designs. The firm's partners, Steven and Cathi House, are also praised by Virginia Tech for their commitment to study abroad, particularly as it relates to architecture, and are on the verge of launching their own school in Mexico for U.S. students to visit. Ask them where it all started, and they point to Salzburg, Austria.

"I spent the summer of 1972, along with 25 other students from Virginia Tech, studying and living and traveling in and around Salzburg," says Steven House. "Our group was based in Salzburg, but we also spent three intensive weeks traveling throughout Italy, Yugoslavia, and Greece. There were just a few weeks of independent travel in this program, but it was definitely a life-changing moment for me. The single most important decision I ever made about my educa-

tion was going abroad because it shot my life trajectory off into a totally different direction. It was an incredibly deep, rich learning experience for me, which solidified in my mind the absolute importance of regular travel to learn about other people and cultures, politics, religion, art, and languages.”

Steven returned home and shared the experience with then-girlfriend Cathi, and the two made a promise to each other that as soon as they were financially able, they would spend a year abroad. They married in 1974, moved to Philadelphia and lived on one salary, saving the other for 18 months to make their dream a reality and then had, in Steven’s words, the “most intense study abroad experience we could possibly have had.”

“We didn’t know how long our money would last,” he says. “We bought a Eurail pass and traveled initially for four months throughout central and northern Europe, and then wound up living on the Greek island of Santorini for five months. We didn’t realize the true impact of that experience, but that time in the Greek Islands became the beginning of a life-long dedication to studying and documenting indigenous cultures throughout the world.”

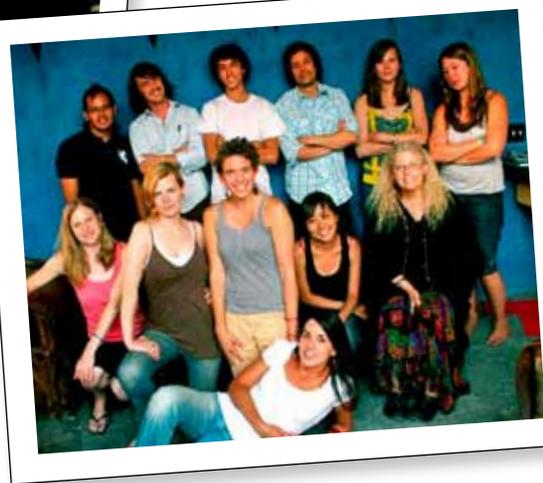
Cathi House agrees. “We had studied the classical architecture and the famous buildings everybody knows, but rarely does anyone teach you about indigenous architecture,” she says. “That was where we found our inspiration—we always return to simple places where people built the buildings themselves, without the help of architects, using the sun and the breezes to heat and cool or illuminate their homes.”

The Houses arrived on Santorini in December of 1975, intending to spend just a few weeks. “At that time in the winter we were the only tourists on the entire island,” Steven remembers. “We didn’t speak Greek, the hotels were all closed, so we ended up renting an amazing house hanging on the edge of a 1,000 foot cliff overlooking the Aegean Sea.”

“We have realized the value that our travels have had on our careers,” says Steven. “We wanted to give back to the university in a way that was meaningful to us, so we established the Steven & Cathi House Traveling Scholarship at Virginia Tech, giving someone in their third year the opportunity to travel for several months.” Currently, that scholarship is given to three students every year, and the Houses say the goal is to give those young adults the same awakening they had on their first trips.



Steven and Cathi House, above and left, meeting with students from their Mexico Study Abroad Program. Below, students pose for the class portrait.



“There was a moment in that time in Greece that changed who we are,” says Cathi. “For me, it feels like the soul of the architect I’ve become was born then. We went back to Greece every year for many years.”

International travel became a priority for the Houses, and they have traveled abroad for four to six weeks every year, visiting Greece frequently—until they stumbled upon the historic, colonial town of San Miguel de Allende in central Mexico. There, they bought property and built a second home for themselves, inviting old classmates, friends, and teachers to come and visit. About 10 years ago, the two—who were then serving on the Advisory Board for the Virginia Tech School of Architecture—first voiced the idea of starting their own school for U.S. students in Mexico, where their second home was located.

“We started talking about creating a study abroad program in San Miguel where students from Virginia Tech could come two or three times a year and immerse themselves in the architecture and culture of Mexico.” Cathi says. “Virginia Tech at the time had no presence in Latin America.” From there, they met with—and got the rousing approval of—Virginia Tech administrators, and started building their school, known as CASA, The Center for Architecture, Sustainability + Art. It will launch this summer, and the Houses

hope the first class will be made up of 20 or so students from a number of universities.

“Cathi and I will be teaching,” says Steven. “We’ll have one or two other professors come too, one from Virginia Tech and one from another school, so there will be four of us there. “We’re not considering only professors, but also architects from our generation who are successful and well-established and who do exceptional work,” adds Cathi. “The school also includes two beautiful guest houses as part of the complex, and we’re using those as a bit of enticement for people to come.”

Steven and Cathi hope the school will inspire its students the way travel has always affected them.

## Experiencing a Personal Cultural Revolution

**John Pomfret**  
Author and International Journalist

**JOHN POMFRET WAS ONE OF THE FIRST** American students to live and study in China when the country was beginning to transition out of the Maoist Cultural Revolution, and says, “It changed my life, to put it mildly.” Which is something for a guy who went to Stanford intending to become a scientist and left as an international journalist.

“I went to Stanford thinking I’d become a neurophysiologist,” he says. “I was taking all of these science classes. On a lark, I took a humanities class where we read Mao and Marx and all of that. I did pretty well in it and my professor encouraged me to take more Chinese history.”

His interests shifted, and he began studying Asian studies in earnest. In 1980, after his junior year, he was offered the chance to go to China’s Nanjing University, and he jumped at it.

“It was an increasingly interesting time,” he says. “I was given the opportunity to live there and I just took it. The great thing with living abroad is that you see how history happens instead of reading about it. And at that time, history was happening every day. China was shedding off its cultural revolution and adopting economic reforms, and it had been closed since 1949. The trip took all the theoretical and book learning I’d amassed about China and put it all into a very deep context.”

Pomfret grew up in Brooklyn, New York, surrounded by families who vacationed in Europe and Mexico, but says his household stayed put for the most part.

“I didn’t have any preconceived notions of what it was going to be like,” he says. “I don’t know why, but I wasn’t expecting it to be different than it was. I’d had so little opportunity to travel before that—I wasn’t a well-traveled kid. I didn’t have images to draw on, but I

wasn’t surprised. I guess nothing fazes you if you’re from New York.”

He also looks back on what seemed like a missed opportunity at the time, and considers it a blessing today.

“Stanford had a program in Taiwan and I’d applied for that,” he says. “Luckily for me, I didn’t get into it—it was to teach English. The opportunity came along to go to China a few months later, and if I’d gotten the Taiwan gig, I wouldn’t have been able to go to the mainland, which was a real adventure.”

“It was really far away,” he remembers. “It took six hours to book a phone call, and it took a month for mail to get home. There were no direct flights at all. I wanted an adventure, I think, an adventure right off the map. There are very few places like that anymore.”

He returned home from his studies, graduated from Stanford, and then headed out to Singapore as a Fulbright scholar, at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies. “I learned Chinese and I thought about being an academic or going into government work,” he says. “I was sending job applications for those sort of things while on the Fulbright, not realizing they didn’t answer inquiries from overseas. I knew I liked to travel and I liked to write. That was the first experience that taught me this is what I wanted to do.”

He landed a job at a medium-size newspaper in California, and was soon sent back to China to cover it for the Associated Press, specifically because he had a background there. He stayed until after the 1989 Tiananmen Square uprising, when all foreign journalists were expelled from the country. Then, he began traveling the world, covering war zones for the AP and the Washington Post, which hired him in 1992 and sent him straight to Bosnia.

“That initial experience in China, learning a foreign language and getting that experience, made it possible for me to be a correspondent,” he says. “It was critical to my career success.”

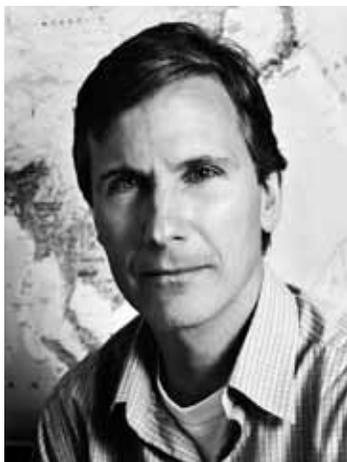
Pomfret took multiple overseas assignments before learning in 1998 that he was headed back to China. And that’s when another turn came for him.

“I’d always had this photograph on my wall of my Nanjing classmates and me,” he says. “It was taken in 1981. I lived with seven other guys in a very small room—maybe 10 by 15—with bunk beds, so it was a very intensive experience. My room in Brooklyn was bigger than that room by far.”

The photo, he says, looked like something from the 1930s. “I was throwing out ideas to a friend of mine about writing about these guys,” he says. “And he told me that nobody wanted to

read about my old stories, and I thought I could use their lives to fuel a narrative. I could string them together to paint a picture of what China was like then.”

He started looking up his old classmates, who had, by then, scattered around the world. After spending time with each of them, he wrote *Chinese Lessons: Five Classmates, and the Story of the New China*, which was published in 2007. He’s currently working on another book about China.



**John Pomfret**

# Starting Young on a Path to Diplomacy

Capricia Penavic Marshall, U.S. Chief of Protocol

**AMBASSADOR** Capricia Penavic Marshall was no stranger to international concepts when she applied for her first education abroad program in high school.

“I came from an international house,” she says. “My father was Croatian and my mother was from Mexico, and people from all over the world were always in our home, speaking all kinds of languages. I grew up in this global atmosphere, but I still wanted to see more and do more and experience more of the world.”



Ambassador Capricia Penavic Marshall greets President Zapatero of Spain at the White House before his meeting with President Obama. Ambassador Marshall studied abroad in Spain.



Ambassador Marshall with President Obama as he greets King Juan Carlos I of Spain at the White House.

What better way than to study in another country?”

The first program she participated in sent her from Cleveland, Ohio to Santiago, Chile, for a summer, to live with a family whose daughter visited the United States and stayed with Marshall’s parents. Several years later, she spent a college semester in Madrid, Spain, participating in a program with Purdue University.

“The trips touched me from a variety of different aspects,” she says. “The first was in my education directly and the way they approached education. It was less about memorizing facts and more about understanding who does what that affects your life. That was interesting to me, and the people I encountered and met were very interesting.”

It also sparked her interest in government and diplomacy. “It really opened my eyes to a desire to do more in the international

field,” she says. “I was studying international relations at the time, and this made me question where that would lead and where I could go. I felt very comfortable in an international setting.”

That started with her own home, which hosted people from other countries quite frequently. Thanks to that, she says, her desire to go overseas in high school—which was not a widely accepted practice at the time—was met with support from her parents.

“We started traveling with my parents at a very young age,” she says. “My father had family in Croatia and we went there regularly. Going to other parts of the world didn’t seem like a big leap to me. I was just one of those kids! I signed up for the program to go study in Chile and came home and told my parents, who scratched their heads, looked at me, and said ‘Okay.’”

Once there, she says, living in a home abroad was just as insightful as the formal education the program provided.

“It was very personal,” she says. “They treated me like a member of the family. I saw more intimately the way a family works, from the moment you wake up in the morning.”

Later, in Madrid, she lived in a residencia—the Spanish equivalent of a dormitory—with Spanish students.

“I made sure when I went to Spain that I moved outside of my comfort zone and my circle of American friends,” she says. “Often-times, you can become your own little unit and you don’t engage

as much with students from the country you're visiting. I did what was odd at the time, and didn't live in an apartment with other American students. I moved to a residencia and really got to know the Spanish students. I had a Spanish roommate, and later, her family came to the states and visited with my family."

The trips, she says, set her on a path toward diplomacy. She joined the Clinton campaign in 1992, as special assistant to Hilary Rodham Clinton, and served as special assistant to the First Lady when the Clintons moved into the White House. She continued working in government until 2009, when she was appointed Chief of Protocol to the United States. There, she works with other governments and U.S. officials to foster an environment conducive to successful diplomacy. One of her favorite duties is welcoming visitors from other countries, including students.

"We had a group of students visiting from India recently," she says. "We had this great conversation about cricket and how it's different from baseball—the flat bat, the different rules—and talked about what's great about India and what's great about America. That kind of exchange is truly diplomacy at its best. And that's what I learned so well when I studied abroad—how to engage, how to learn more about other people, how to understand cultural differences. That's really the



basis and the framework of what we do here in the Office of Protocol."

"I feel very at home in the Office of Protocol due to these experiences I had when I studied abroad," she continues. "I brought to this position my aptitude for and desire to learn more about the

people from around the world. We noted the importance of teaching young people about people from different parts of the world, and we've implemented a new division to do that." She regularly hosts children from other countries with their U.S. counterparts to share food, music, and traditions of both nations between then.

She also encourages students from other nations to visit the United States, and says American students need to be open to travel as well.

"I tell them to be open to the opportunities," she says. "Don't cut a path for yourself. Be open to opportunities. You never know what might come along, and something like this can take you down a new, exciting road that's completely different from what you thought."

**IE**

**KIM FERNANDEZ** is a freelance writer in Bethesda, Maryland. Her last article for *IE* was "Advocacy Is Critical" in the third annual intensive language supplement published with the March/April 2011 issue.

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