

Riley Green

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Our summer in Nantes will stay with us. We became a team; we became a family. My month-long study abroad introduced me to a way of life in France I had not experienced and gifted me with memories I will cherish for years to come. My host family was the home base for my expeditions with a great team of fellow students. Educators from CMU and in Nantes were the pedagogical sherpas of an extraordinary sojourn, setting the tone of inquiry and curiosity to learn beyond simple sightseeing. Together, we fostered open-mindedness and gave personal meaning to empathy between people of different cultures. We saw the chasms created by politics and we stepped across them effortlessly, discovering that our differences reveal the similarities that make us human. Thanks to my study abroad, I was witness to the importance of understanding each culture's unique needs. Je voudrais aussi remercier l'Alliance Française pour le soutien qu'ils offrent à la communauté, permettant à des générations d'approfondir leurs expériences dans le monde francophone, à l'échelle locale et internationale.

The journey to Nantes was a nearly 24-hour odyssey, punctuated by layovers in cities I hope to revisit. I relived the childlike thrill of vacation, using enthusiasm to carry me through the realities of travel's cramped seats and depleted batteries.

My hosts are a married couple with four children. Frederic shared his love of history, his passion for reading, and his lifelong dedication to supporting his family. Sandra, with her wealth of kindness and wisdom, is devoted to the organization of esteemed educational programs. They greeted me as family with the excitement of my arrival shared between us, and I immediately felt comfortable and welcomed. We shared authentic meals and adventures as they told me stories about their life and the France they know. Their friendship and stories provided me with fond memories and a deeper understanding of life in France.

During orientation, we were shown the emotional curve of study abroad students, warning us of the challenges that might arise after the initial excitement. As many young people naively feel, I dismissed the cautions, convinced of my adaptability. Day by day, the business of residing

and having work obligations gave me a completely different experience compared to previous travel with my family as tourists.

The five-week program was a whirlwind of activity and novel interactions. Our classes provided a lens through which to examine Nantes' past and apply it to the present, with daily tours of culturally significant monuments and attractions. We visited a whole host of museums and installations, including the “Machines de l'Île”, a mechanical universe using remnants of Nantes' industrial history to bring to life Jules Verne's *Invented Worlds*.

Despite worries that I would be sidelined by an ankle injury, my fellow students worked as a team to help me overcome the hurdles of mobility as we embarked on these tours of Nantes' cultural treasures. From world-class museums, to more modern art installations like the “Voyage à Nantes,” we immersed ourselves in the city's rich heritage.

With the group becoming my volunteer support crew, we visited churches and castles, hundreds of years old and still standing impressively, in near perfect condition.

There is a unique quality to the emotional sense of awe and the magnitude of time that one takes in firsthand that cannot be conveyed by films and books. The grandeur of paintings and architecture left a profound impression on me, expanding my perspective on art and culture.

As a class, we created artwork reflecting our experiences in Nantes. I collaborated with a group to create an artistic representation of the mobility challenges we encountered through a tactile map. By tracing my map with their fingers, my friends could step into the shoes of someone with limited mobility, to experience uneven surfaces that might have gone unnoticed, to feel narrow walkways, and encounter steps that make it challenging to navigate the city. It was also a way for me to thank them for being my team and lifting me up.

Together, we proved that old cities like Nantes can be made accessible and inviting to people, overcoming mobility challenges and including everyone in their own way.

Living with a host family immersed me in French culture, creating a welcoming environment for me to become a local if only briefly. Having studied French from a young age, I tried to blend in, practicing my French and living as just another local shopping for quality produce. It was an ordinary life, but an exciting mission for me.

We had simple yet memorable evenings, taking time to have dinner as a family to share the events of the day, the political discussion, having bread and cheese at the end of the meal so that the bread didn't fill our appetite before the *plat principal* – simple things that stay in my memory – time to unwind and read a book... reflected the ordinary yet meaningful aspects of life. They are just like my family, my friends, and me; we may be different in the small details of our day to day lives, yet we are all the same. *C'est dans nos différences que l'on retrouve les similarités qui nous rendent humain.*