

Gilman International Scholarship Program



Valery Lavigne
China, 2009

College of New Jersey
Anthropology, Chinese Languages & Literature
New Jersey



I decided to apply for the Gilman Scholarship after reading an article in my school newspaper about a Gilman Scholar in Egypt. As a Dominican immigrant and first-generation college student from a low-income family, studying abroad presented large financial obstacles. Pursuing my love of language and culture abroad suddenly seemed possible through the Gilman Scholarship.

My study abroad experience in China was life-changing. My program gave me the chance to experience life at the University of Beijing, a top university with a large international student population. I attended the lectures of many influential leaders and made Chinese and international friends. The most memorable parts of my program were my language partner and home-stay. My home-stay situation allowed me to experience family life in China while my language partner became both my friend and my mentor. She helped me become confident in speaking Mandarin and smoothed my transition to life in China.

The goal of my Gilman Follow-on Service Project was to encourage study abroad among disadvantaged students at my college, specifically those in the Educational Opportunity Fund (EOF) program, of which I am also a member. The EOF program provides direct academic and financial support to low-income and minority students on campus. I presented for EOF freshman and created a website, showcasing profiles of study abroad alumni and information on study abroad and the Gilman Scholarship. Additionally, I participated in a panel of students speaking to the freshman class. I spoke about my experiences in China and how the Gilman Scholarship helped me to study abroad.

My experience in China inspired me to continue pursuing an international education. I received a Critical Language Scholarship to study in Shanghai, China in 2011 and a Peace Corps placement in Asia for early 2012. My time in China also helped me to focus on a career in government or an international non-profit. Academically, studying abroad tremendously improved my Mandarin. By living in another nation and viewing the world through their eyes, I have become a better student, a better international citizen, and a better American. I am honored to have assisted the Gilman Scholarship in its mission to promote international education among students traditionally underrepresented in study abroad programs. I thank the program for all the opportunities and inspiration it has given me and my peers.

Valery met First Lady Michelle Obama and participated in a panel discussion with Assistant Secretary Ann Stock of the U.S. State Department, Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs during the "100,000 Strong to China" event in Washington D.C.

WWW.IIE.ORG/GILMAN