

Keys to Access Award: MIUSA

CADRE is pleased to announce the selection of Mobility International USA (MIUSA) as the recipient of the 2001 "Keys to Access" Award. MIUSA is an exemplary leader in achieving the goals recognized by the Award.

MIUSA, founded in 1981, is a national non-profit organization whose mission is to empower people with disabilities around the world through international exchange; information dissemination; technical assistance and training; and to ensure the inclusion of people with disabilities in international exchange and development programs.

MIUSA's international exchanges specialize in leadership training, community service, cross-cultural experiential learning and advocacy for the rights and inclusion of persons with disabilities. MIUSA has held exchanges with over 76 different countries, providing international opportunities to approximately 1,400 participants worldwide.

In the realm of international development and disability, MIUSA focuses on bringing to the forefront the perspectives and contributions people with disabilities can make to the economic and social development of the communities in which they live. MIUSA's International development and disability initiative has taken a prominent role in influencing policies and practices regarding the inclusion of people with disabilities in all levels of international development projects.

MIUSA exchange delegations are comprised of youth and professionals with a variety of disabilities. A group of 15 delegates typically includes Deaf individuals, persons who are blind or have visual impairments, persons who use wheelchairs or have other mobility impairments and individuals with learning disabilities. Delegates work together combining their strengths and abilities to make every activity possible for each person. A delegate who is blind would push a wheelchair user through the streets of Mexico, while the wheelchair user guides and describes the architecture. A wheelchair user might write what is being said or learn signs to help interpret for a Deaf delegate, who in turn may assist a wheelchair user up the steps of a typically inaccessible mosque. MIUSA delegations naturally build unique collaborative relationships that lead to their goal of achieving an inclusive society.

MIUSA unites people of all ages, races, religions and disabilities to advocate for a common goal of shared understanding and improved disability rights throughout the world. Beginning and established leaders of all ages and disabilities bring awareness to communities worldwide, influence laws and practices promoting justice, equity and respect for all individuals. A universal premise of MIUSA exchanges is the development of leadership skills that delegates carry back into their communities. Participants who have little previous

knowledge of the disability movement return from exchanges fired up with the ideas, motivation, and confidence to start disability advocacy organizations for youth in their communities, or to launch fundraising campaigns to bring assistive technology and other resources to their third world countries.

One of the greatest keys to the success of MIUSA's exchange programs is their homestay family program. Whether in Eugene, Oregon, or Tokyo, Japan, families in the local community volunteer to open their homes to delegates from all over the world during international exchange programs. With this enriching experience comes a commitment to learn about different disabilities, make their homes as accessible as possible, and to be open to crossing language, accessibility and cultural barriers to create lasting international bonds of friendship and good will.

MIUSA both demonstrates and promotes diversity in policy, practice and perspective on several different levels. Delegates and hosts on MIUSA's international exchange programs share ideas, collaborate, and advocate for improved policies and practices that are appropriate within the host country's culture. The focus varies but might include disability rights law, the depiction of people with disabilities in the media, education or healthcare. After an exchange in Mexico that provided the opportunity for Deaf delegates from Mexico and the US to exchange strategies, the small Mexican city sent delegates to study to become sign language interpreters, a previously unrecognized profession.

MIUSA, together with the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA) of the United States Department of State, serves as the National Clearinghouse on Disability and Exchange (NCDE). The NCDE aims to educate people with disabilities and disability-related organizations about international opportunities, and to educate exchange organizations about how existing programs can become more inclusive and accessible in order to increase the participation of people with disabilities in the full range of international exchange programs. NCDE provides technical assistance and training to colleges, universities and private exchange organizations to ensure that policies, practices and perspectives are inclusive of participants with disabilities.

A primary goal of the NCDE is to facilitate partnerships between people with disabilities, disability-related organizations and international exchange organizations throughout the world, to ensure a successful international experience for students and professionals with disabilities. MIUSA also collaborates with disability agencies, schools, recreation organizations, youth groups and parent organizations throughout the U.S. to recruit participants for delegations that reflect diversity in ethnicity, geographic region, economic status, race and disability.

All of MIUSA's exchange programs have a focus of leadership development and disability rights. The MIUSA Slogan is "Challenge Yourself and Change the World". The foundation of all MIUSA programs is that there is nothing that

anyone cannot do, whether it is climbing a pyramid in a wheelchair or participating in discussion with hosts whose country have no recognized sign language interpreters. An emphasis is placed on developing the leadership skills that allow delegates to determine for themselves what is possible and to direct the support needed to accomplish a task. With the support of the rest of the delegation, individuals challenge themselves to reach heights they never imagined.