



Deirdre Murphy, front left (with white t-shirt and jeans) and some of her campus friends at the University of California

YEAR OF A LIFETIME

A year studying abroad in the University of California, Santa Barbara, was an amazing experience, for a 21-year-old student with type 1 diabetes.

Deirdre Murphy
tells her story

My year in Santa Barbara California was one of the best experiences of my life and one that I will never forget.

I remember reading a 'cheesy' teen novel a few summers ago about a group of friends that decide to travel the world

instead of going to college. They embark on this adventure and decide to coin it 'The year of opportunity'. In a way my decision to go to California was a bit like that. It enabled me to experience my very own year of opportunity.

This phrase was incorporated into our daily lives. It became a motto, a driving force and a way to justify all the crazy new things we did. It was a running joke between my roommates and I. If in doubt... "Ah sure it's the year of opportunity, why not?"

The idea of studying abroad for my third year had always fascinated me and the prospect of going to California was so exciting, so I was keen to take part in the UCD Education Abroad Programme. However, as an arts student with a joint major in Irish and Geography I wasn't sure of my chances of being selected as it was pretty

clear that there certainly wouldn't be any 'Teanga na Gaeilge' classes in California! I applied anyway and when a month later I received the news that I had the opportunity to go – I couldn't believe it!

It was still one of the hardest decisions I had to make. Could I really move away for a *whole* year, leave my family and friends? Distance was also a big worry for me; it wasn't as though I could hop on a Ryanair flight home for a weekend if I was missing home.

And I had to think about how I would cope with my type 1 diabetes while living away from home. I was diagnosed with type 1 in March 1993 aged four, so I suppose you could say I don't really know what life is like without it. I have never allowed diabetes to get in the way of things and California wasn't going to be any different.

I am not too fond of change. I believe in the ‘if it’s not broken don’t fix it’ saying and took this approach towards my insulin regime. I was adamant not to change over to using the pre-filled insulin pens. I was happy filling my insulin injections twice daily. However, when I began college I started to notice that the insulin regime I was on was no longer working for me. I was constantly feeling ‘high’ and my blood sugar was especially high in the afternoon.

I was advised to try out fast-acting insulin and pens and I reluctantly agreed to do so. I have to say the new regime changed my life! It made everything so much easier. I loved how it was less regimented than what I was used to. I was no longer confined to eating at certain times. I became aware of correction doses – something I would have never used previously. The insulin pen gave me freedom and this was especially important when going away to a new country with different lifestyles and customs.

Lifestyle more active

The campus at UC Santa Barbara is beautifully situated overlooking the Pacific Ocean with its own beach on campus filled with surfers not to mention the great social life! The Californians have a different lifestyle and I needed to adapt to these new ways. I found the lifestyle to be a lot more active.

Cycling was extremely popular, and as we didn’t have a car we ‘biked’ everywhere. The nice weather also allowed for more constant exercise outdoors. It was necessary for me to change my insulin regime to suit this new active lifestyle and the warm weather affected my blood sugars too.

In America I had to be particularly careful in relation to my eating habits and the types of foods I was buying in the supermarket.

The food was quite different to home with a lot more convenience and fast foods. It was often difficult to find products in the supermarket that suited me.

It seemed as though every item had a lot more sugar than the equivalent at home. Staple foods such as bread even

DEIRDRE MURPHY'S TIPS FOR STUDENTS STUDYING ABROAD

- Investigate doctors and pharmacies on campus and in the area so you know who to call in case of an emergency.
- Be aware of time zone changes while flying. Talk to your diabetes team to create an insulin plan for the flight and new time zones.
- Be prepared to be stopped multiple times and questioned in airports because of your medication bag – have a doctor’s letter at all times.
- Be aware of environmental effects on blood sugars and overall health.
- Be sure to make your new housemates and friends aware of your diabetes in case of an emergency – show them where you keep your medication.
- Plan ahead – your parents won’t be there to remind you of things – especially when going on trips away from the house.
- Have enough food, insulin and glucose sweets on you and in the house.
- Have fun! Diabetes is just a part of life, it doesn’t inhibit or define it.

tasted sweet! Even wholemeal breads had a huge amount of high fructose corn syrup; it was so frustrating that I even attempted to make my own soda bread. It took me a while and lots of label reading to sort out which foods were suitable and wouldn’t significantly affect my blood sugar.

We were obliged to sign up for college health insurance, but luckily I was never ill while I was away. The campus had a fully equipped health centre which was great, however, there was no specific endocrinologist so after one check-up I decided to wait until I returned home at Christmas to see my diabetes team.

Although there is much criticism of the Irish health system I feel extremely grateful for the Irish health care and for getting my diabetes supplies for free. I would go into the pharmacy and look at the astronomical prices of diabetes supplies and be very thankful of our system here in Ireland.

Insulin adjustment

I noticed while away that it took me almost two weeks to stabilise my blood sugars. I was low quite often when I first arrived due to time zone changes and other factors. It was important to take the change of lifestyle, weather and activity into consideration when deciding my insulin doses. Interestingly, the American glucose sweets were not as effective as the ones I use at home; I needed to take a significantly

larger number of US sweets to treat a low.

Santa Barbara opened my eyes to all the amazing opportunities the world has to offer. I became a lot more independent and inventive while I was away. Barbara, my roommate and I even managed to assemble our bedroom furniture with a potato peeler – we have the pictures to prove it!

I did some amazing things while I was away. Along with my geography classes I took some fantastic classes such as first Aid/CPR, nutrition, global medicine, acting and gospel choir.

I also volunteered in the local hospital helping out in the playroom of the paediatric ward which I really enjoyed.

Along with academic studies I got to travel a lot. We went to San Diego, Las Vegas, Grand Canyon, San Francisco, Portland and Seattle and I met some amazing people. The Californians were all so welcoming and all the other international students too. I now have friends from all over the world from Thailand, South Korea to France, Germany and Italy.

I absolutely loved my year abroad. Although I was concerned before I left, I coped really well and diabetes did not interfere with my experience. It was the best year of my life – now it almost seems like a dream. I would strongly encourage people to consider studying abroad because you never know, you might be selected and you too can embark on your own year of opportunity.