

INSPIRED BY STUDY ABROAD EXPERIENCE GUIDES A CAREER

IN SCOUTING FOR AN OVERSEAS study opportunity as part of her junior year at the University of Pittsburgh, Liza Mitgang discovered the Ginsburg-Ingerman Overseas Student Program (OSP) at BGU. She immediately knew it was unique.

“OSP had the only global health track I found for undergraduate students in Israel.” Global health was Liza’s main interest, and the program’s desert location—which she had briefly visited before and wanted to explore further—added to the attraction.

Her experience began with an *ulpan*, a six-week intensive course in Hebrew, along with an international group of students from all over the world. Although OSP courses are taught in English, speaking Hebrew is important because “unlike in traditional programs, we weren’t put in an ‘American bubble,’ isolated from other students,” Liza says. “We were immersed in BGU and lived in student dorms with Israeli roommates, which encouraged us to speak Hebrew and fostered a connection with another culture.”

The BGU environment offered more advantages. “It was exhilarating in a way I’d never experienced traveling before. But also, being in the Negev rather than in a major city to the north, you find that people are there for a particular reason—to study and explore their interests. This made for a very rich atmosphere that allowed me to grow intellectually and see a more authentic Israel.”

Most rewarding of all was the design of the learning experience. Liza was able to choose among courses such as “Global Health and Development” and “Health in the Age of Globalization.” She was also encouraged to undertake an independent research project. She formed her own research

survey and explored her inquiry through fieldwork.

“I was taken aback by the faculty’s willingness to facilitate my research and help me grow as an academic,” she says. “They introduced me to a community I had no familiarity with at all and made me comfortable. They made me feel I could contribute more in the field of public health than I would have thought possible.”

Three mornings each week Liza traveled with a Bedouin physician, accompanying him to health clinics in three Bedouin towns. She observed the physician-patient interaction, gained perspective on the people’s health issues and came to understand their logistical challenges in accessing the clinics and making healthful choices.

Liza’s research focused on the urbanization of the Negev Bedouin and, specifically, how environmental

and behavioral changes are affecting women’s health. Because her sample was small, she is cautious about stating broad conclusions.



Liza Mitgang

“The steps and processes were more illuminating than the results,” she says. “But the fondest takeaway for me was seeing the positive changes occurring in the Bedouin community, particularly a growing awareness of health and well being.”

“I saw this especially among women who were taking an active role: going to a Bedouin women’s gym, a community conference, a workshop on diabetes. These are conscious, positive lifestyle changes that can be recreated in other communities.”

Liza appreciates how the six months connected her with people who remain among her closest friends. She continues to see them regularly and has already returned to Israel several times.

“OSP enabled me to pursue my interests in a real and lasting way. It gave me firsthand insight as to how changes in health are profoundly influenced by context and environment,

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and how every community is unique and requires a tailored approach.”

Liza graduated from the University of Pittsburgh in 2013. Now 24, she is a research assistant at the Harvard

School of Public Health, and believes her OSP experience helped guide her toward this career. The department she works in focuses on a diverse research portfolio, including the value of vaccination and its

economic importance to families, communities and countries.

Liza plans at some point to earn a master's degree in urban planning and global health.

“I hope my future plans will be international,” she says. “And that I’ll go back to Israel in a professional capacity—or at least to visit.” ■

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