

HOW FULBRIGHT BELIEVED IN ME WHEN NO ONE ELSE DID, AND HOW I HAD TO BREAK THE MOLD TO PASS THIS GIFT ON

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ABSTRACT

The Fulbright program changed my life. As a blind woman who spent six years homeless, I struggled to find anyone who would invest in me. In 2017, Fulbright sent me to America to study for my Masters. In 2022, I received a ‘Fulbright in the Classroom’ grant, a welcome opportunity to give back—but to do so, I had to invent a new model to reach people with disabilities around the world.

Keywords: disability • accessibility • webinar • inclusion • community



STREET SMARTS

Before I was a Fulbright scholar, I was homeless. Born in a rural Tamazight community in the Atlas Mountains of Morocco, I grew up outcast and orphaned, shuffled from home to home and forced to do domestic work until the age of 17, when I was blinded by a family member and abandoned in the hospital.

I started school for the first time that same year. I’d had no previous education and didn’t even know how to read, but I learned Braille in a night and a day, picked up French and Standard Arabic in less than a year, and completed twelve years of schooling in six—all while homeless.

After graduation, I rented a room with financial support from an American couple. I attended Moulay Ismail University and earned an Associate’s degree in English literature, then went to Mohamed V and earned a Bachelor’s degree in applied linguistics. I started applying for a Fulbright in 2013, encouraged by a taxi driver. This wasn’t unusual: most of the people who supported me while I was homeless had been taxi drivers.

At the time, I didn’t understand what a Fulbright was. I thought it was a local scholarship, and that I’d be competing against a few dozen fellow Moroccans at most. Little did I know—and I’m grateful that I didn’t—that I was up against thousands of applicants from all around the globe. If I’d understood that, I might not have bothered to apply. As it was, I faced mockery, even from some whom I’d thought would support me. The application process was a waste of my time, they maintained. I didn’t listen.

Only later did it dawn on me, as I was taking the TOEFL and the GRE and sitting through multiple rounds of interviews, that the Fulbright might actually be a big deal.

In retrospect, my ignorance and emotional detachment from the process most likely worked in my favor. When an interviewer asked what I would do if I didn't get the Fulbright, I replied, "I've got plenty of things to do. That's not really your business!"

They also asked what I would do if I *did* get a Fulbright. Unlike the other questions, I took this one seriously. To this day, I still clearly remember dictating the following words: "If I get the Fulbright, I'll use the opportunity to start my own media platform and tell untold stories about people like myself, people with disabilities, who've been left behind."

The morning of my very last interview, on my way out the door, I stumbled over a hot stove that a roommate, jealous of my aspirations, had strategically placed on the threshold. The metal scorched my leg, which blistered from ankle to knee. I went to the interview anyway but didn't hike up my dress to reveal what had happened until the interviewer asked why I was so distracted. "Go home," he told me. "You're okay. I think we can be done."

A short time later, I left the country for Malaysia. I didn't think I'd get the Fulbright, and I wasn't even planning to return to Morocco. As it happened, I was wrong on both counts. Unexpected circumstances brought me back in spring of 2017, and when I landed, I was greeted with the news that I was now a Fulbright scholar.

To this day, the shock and the joy of that moment are a highwater mark in my life.

I spent the summer getting rid of everything I owned and, in July, boarded a plane bound for a place whose name I'd never heard, a place I suspected might not even be part of America, a place where I would earn my Master's degree in journalism and strategic media, connect with an elderly American couple who've become just like family, and meet my future husband. That place is Arkansas.

FULBRIGHT, TECHNOLOGY, TUMORS, AND ME

I landed at XNA Regional Airport with no plan, no money, and (of course) no eyes. I hadn't eaten in forty-eight hours, and I had no idea how to get from the airport to the apartment that my Fulbright advisor had rented for me.

Unbeknownst to me, while I was crossing the Atlantic, one of my friends in Morocco had posted on Facebook, asking for someone to greet me in Arkansas. When I stepped off the escalator, a man approached me and asked, "Are you Itto?" I said I was. He said, "Come with me." Too exhausted to resist, I did as I was told.

This man, as it happened, knew a lot of Fulbright scholars, and had hosted many international students in his home. On the way to my apartment, we stopped at a store. He bought me an iPhone. He told me to save his contact info, and even though I knew what the words “save” and “contact info” meant, I had no idea what to do. I started to cry. He thought I was afraid to live alone and asked if I wanted to stay with him and his wife instead. I shook my head no. “I’ve been on my own all my life,” I said. “I just can’t save your contact. This phone doesn’t have Braille. It’s not for the blind.”

I’d heard of screen readers and completed my undergraduate thesis on them, but I’d never had a chance to use one. I didn’t know that this phone came with VoiceOver built in.

The man, whom I now call my American father, promised that I would learn to use the phone. He showed me how to turn VoiceOver on so I could start exploring on my own. Then he added that he’d do some research and teach me everything he learned.

In the coming weeks and months and years, he and many other people helped me bridge the gap from total ignorance to expertise. I mastered smartphones, computers, and Braille displays and inspired everyone who helped me along the way.

Of course, it wasn’t just technology that I had to learn from scratch. Despite all the courses I’d taken on English, American culture, and the American education system, I knew a lot less than I thought I did. I could speak fluently about Jean-Paul Sartre’s philosophical treatise “On Being and Nothingness,” but I’d never learned everyday words like “aluminum foil” and often went without basic necessities because I didn’t know how to find them at Walmart. I knew that dress codes in the US weren’t as strict as in Morocco, but I wasn’t sure where American freedoms ended and once went to my neighbors to ask for help reading my mail while wearing nothing but a bra and underwear! Last but not least, though I’d managed to navigate the byzantine, French-style education system in Morocco, the American system still managed to confuse me: when I saw there was a class called “History of the Black Press,” for example, I signed up for it eagerly expecting to learn how black newspaper ink was manufactured!

The challenges didn’t stop coming, but as time went on, I grew increasingly cultural hybridized and confident in my ability to navigate America. As an extrovert, I made friends with everyone, from the volunteers who came to read to me, to strangers on buses, to Paratransit drivers, to my fellow Fulbright scholars.

In summer of 2019, I made yet another friend. I’d written my thesis and was looking for someone to help me revise it, and a fellow Fulbrighter, Tri Murniati, referred me to someone who used to tutor at my university writing center. We connected on Facebook, and one afternoon, he came to my apartment. We started by discussing my thesis, but before long, we found

ourselves talking about everything from overcoming trauma, to cultivating psychological objectivity, to Jean-Paul Sartre. Up to that point, even with all the friends I'd made, I'd struggled to find people who would challenge me intellectually. Mekiya was able and willing to do so. I was overjoyed.

At the time, I didn't realize that I'd actually met him once before, two years earlier, the day after I'd landed in Arkansas. Apparently, he sat beside me at the welcome dinner for my Fulbright cohort. Even after he told me, I didn't remember. Nor did I know then that three years later, we'd get married. He would take my last name, and together we created the international media platform I wrote about on my Fulbright application. [The DateKeepers](#) is the realization of my longest-standing dream: to practice journalism for the good of people who've been left behind. At the time, I knew none of this. All I knew was that I made a friend.

I was supposed to graduate that year, but my body had other plans. For much of 2019, while attempting to prepare my thesis, I'd been distracted by a chronic and excruciating pain. At first, I was told it was psychosomatic, a delayed response to trauma, but then two tumors were discovered in my hip. I had to have surgery. This delayed my thesis defense to 2020.

I was still feeling the effects of the operation when the pandemic hit, and I had to go into quarantine. To counter the sudden social isolation, I took advantage of my hard-won technological fluency by going online and connecting with Fulbrighters based around the world. I also found myself involved in online conversations about disability and digital accessibility, which had been sparked by the world's sudden pivot to online work and school. As time went on, these two threads wove together in my head until, in April of 2021, with support from John Bader, Christine Oswald, and other members of the Fulbright Association, I founded [Fulbrighters with Disabilities](#), a global, virtual chapter dedicated to passing on the gifts that the Fulbright has given me and supporting students and scholars with disabilities all around the world.

FULBRIGHT IN THE CLASSROOM, A COMMUNITY EFFORT

Every year, the Fulbright Association awards the 'Fulbright in the Classroom' grant to one of its alumni. The purpose of this grant is to raise awareness about the opportunities the Fulbright offers in underrepresented communities. Traditionally, the grant recipient visits three educational institutions that serve impoverished and marginalized communities and hosts information sessions about Fulbright for the students there. Applicants for the grant must specify which schools they're going to visit and how their information sessions will help underrepresented students and scholars.

In 2022, I was awarded the 'Fulbright in the Classroom' grant. In my application, I never specified which schools I would visit. Instead, I took a different tack: one that, as far as I know, had never been done before.

Having navigated everything from homelessness to a Master's of Arts program while totally blind, I'm familiar with the many types of barriers that people with disabilities face worldwide. In every country, those of us with disabilities are, on average, less physically and socially mobile than our non-disabled peers. We experience higher rates of poverty, worse health outcomes, more social isolation, lower rates of employment, and lower rates of education. Often, we're excluded from educational institutions altogether, if not explicitly, by dint of law, then implicitly, by lack of financial resources and inaccessible infrastructure that prevents us from traveling to brick-and-mortar schools.

To circumvent some of these barriers, I decided that I wouldn't visit brick-and-mortar schools, either. Instead, I hosted three virtual classrooms, which students and scholars with disabilities could attend from anywhere in the world as long as they had access to a computer, tablet, or smartphone with a working internet connection.

Once again, Fulbright took a chance on me, and once again, it paid off for both of us. I can't take sole credit, though. These virtual sessions were community efforts. I chose a screen-reader-accessible platform for videoconferencing, but to ensure that people with different disabilities felt welcome, I had to consult with others. I was supported in these recruitment efforts by Geghie Davis, Mark Bookman, Frank Mondelli, and Istou Diallo, then the board members of Fulbrighters with Disabilities. To make the sessions accessible for participants who are D/deaf or hard of hearing, Colleen Germain volunteered to provide CART services, and Sara Lynn Thelen volunteered to provide sign language interpretation. On one occasion, when Sara wasn't able to attend, one of the participants even jumped in and provided interpretation.

Since the Fulbright offers many different programs for which attendees might apply, I recruited my fellow alumni Geghie Davis, Miso Kwak, and Mounir Rafik to speak about their experiences navigating different programs, such as the open study/research awards and the ETA, with and without disabilities.

By presenting this ensemble cast to the attendees, I also aimed to dispel the idea that the Fulbright isn't *for* people with disabilities. Many of us struggle with internalized ableism, stigma, and shame and don't bother to apply for such prestigious opportunities, believing they're beyond our reach. A critical part of my mission, over and above sharing technical information about how to apply for a Fulbright and navigate physical and cultural barriers, was to challenge this notion and let attendees know that there *is* hope for them, there *are* opportunities, if they can muster the courage to put themselves out there.

Time zones presented an additional barrier. To reach as many people as possible, I hosted each session on a different day of the week and at a different time. I even scheduled one at 8:00 p.m. my time. Everyone who knows me knows that I usually wake up at 3:00 a.m. and run out of energy

by 5:00 in the evening. I have Mekiya to thank for supplying me with a steady stream of coffee that night so I could function. He also provided technical support, moderating the sessions, admitting attendees, and muting and unmuting participants so I could concentrate on giving my presentation without also using my screen reader.

Even with the sessions held at different times, there were still people who, for one reason or another, couldn't attend. To accommodate them, we've made recordings of the sessions available. In lieu of participating in the Q&A, anyone with questions is encouraged to reach out to Fulbrighters with Disabilities at fwd@fulbright.org.

Though we lacked the benefit of an established playbook, we achieved everything I hoped to achieve, reaching hundreds of students and scholars with disabilities around the world, creating a welcoming, inclusive, accessible virtual environment for them, and showcasing the diverse opportunities the Fulbright offers. I want to thank the Fulbright Program and Association for always believing in me, for trusting me to craft and deliver an encouraging message to aspiring, disadvantaged students and scholars, and for investing, not just in me, but in people with disabilities around the world. I also want to thank Fulbrighters with Disabilities, everyone who volunteered to help with the virtual classrooms, and last but not least, my loving husband for committing their time and energy, throwing their support behind me, and making this one of the best experiences I had in 2022.

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NOTES

1. To learn more about Itto's journey, read her [interview with ABILITY Magazine](#) or listen to her [interview with Blind Abilities Podcast](#).
2. For more information about Fulbrighters with Disabilities, visit the chapter's [website](#) or read "[Fulbrighters with Disabilities: Launch](#)" and "[FORWARD: Fulbrighters with Disabilities Breaks New Ground, Leaves No One Behind](#)."
3. To learn more about the structural barriers faced by people with disabilities worldwide, read the World Health Organization's page on disability [here](#).

BIOGRAPHY

Itto Outini became a Fulbright grantee in 2017 and completed her M.A. in the US in 2020. She's worked as a journalist in the US and Morocco, publishing with outlets including The Chicago Tribune, UNDP's People for 2030 Blog, and ABILITY Magazine. Her life story has also been featured on BBC. In 2021, she founded Fulbrighters with Disabilities, a global, virtual chapter of the Fulbright Association, and in 2022, she and her husband Mekiya co-founded The DateKeepers, an international media platform committed to publishing untold stories and highlighting well-lived lives, especially those of people with disabilities, advocates, and allies around the world. Itto and Mekiya now live in Kansas City, Missouri, where they're curating *The DateKeepers* and working together on Itto's forthcoming memoir, *Blindness is the Light of My Life*. Itto can be reached at itto.outini@gmail.com
