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CSTP Program/Student Travel Industry

Since attending my first SYTA conference in 2012 as a mere volunteer, I knew that student travel had my heart. I realized that the shared passion and commitment by all of those involved was like no other industry. There is just something different about travel professionals in the student travel industry. When these professionals gather together in one place, all committed to the same passion, the world begins to change. I believe there is nothing more valuable than adolescent travel and can speak from experience – perhaps in a different way than most.

I was twenty-six years old the first time I set foot in New York City. Yes, only four years away from thirty. Like many others, my face was glued to the tiny airplane window for my first glimpse of the Statue of Liberty. When I saw her, warm tears rolled down my cheeks as I sat alone amongst strangers. I must have walked twenty miles when my feet finally hit the pavement. I was your typical first timer – camera in hand, *I heart NYC* t-shirt intact, and eyes wandering up and down every skyscraper. When I finally returned to my room, exhausted yet fulfilled, my mind could not stop thinking about my 12-year-old sister at home in Tennessee. The two of us are fourteen years apart, and she is the center of my world. I thought to myself *“What if I would have seen this fourteen years ago? It would have changed my life.”*

My childhood was filled with love from both of my parents, who struggled to make ends meet in the mountains of East Tennessee. My mother a server and my father a musician, things of value came in many forms – a hotdog and Yoo-Hoo™ from Boyd’s Creek Market, a homemade aluminum foil hat, a trip to the video store. To me, my childhood was perfect, and I would do it all again in a heartbeat. What we did not have monetarily my parents more than made up for in the love and attention they showed us. All this to say, my childhood was not filled with life-changing travel experiences. My first time on an airplane I was nineteen years old. My first time to the Rockies I was twenty-four. My first time to Washington D.C. was at age twenty-six. And as much as I loved my childhood and never wished for more, I could not help but wish these things for my baby sister. The way that these places opened my eyes and the confidence it gave me was life-changing. From that moment on, I committed myself to giving her the experiences I never had. Her first time on an airplane she was twelve years old, which also happened to be her first trip out of the country. Her first time in Washington D.C. was at age 10 and her first time in New York City was this year at age thirteen. These experiences have shaped her and opened her eyes to a different world. This commitment to my sister has carried over to this industry. I have seen firsthand how travel (and lack of travel) changes student lives and there is nothing more powerful.

When I first began the CSTP training program, I was unsure of what to expect. I signed up for my first class and was blown away by the takeaways I received. One of the most valuable lessons I learned through CSTP training was defining a business’s guiding principles and how those impact our success. One of our key guiding principles at the Nashville Convention & Visitors Corporation is our commitment to exceptional hospitality, which I believe is a key ingredient in any destination looking to capture the student market. Teachers want to feel valued and appreciated, student tour operators want

to be treated with respect and kindness, and students want to feel like they are a part of the culture in any place they visit. From numerous discussions with student tour operators throughout my attendance at four going on five SYTA conferences, I have learned many helpful tips and tactics when approaching the student travel professional – from big picture to small details. The knowledge and experience I have learned combined with my undying passion for student travel will continue to carry me forward in this industry. Like many of my peers, the heart of our work lies in the faces of those students who see the world for the first time. I am honored to be a part of an industry that truly changes lives.