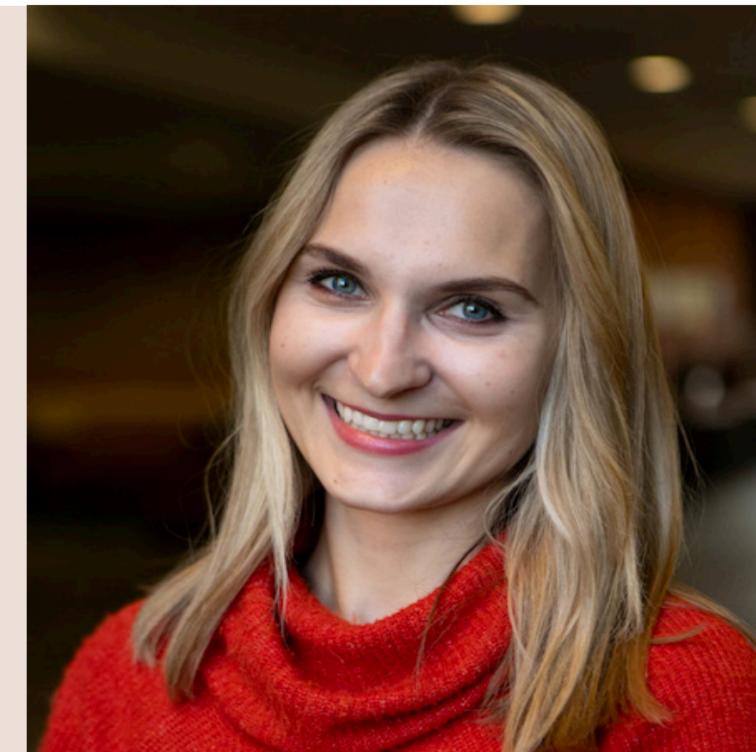




By Makenzi Johnson

Empowerment from experience

A study abroad experience for Virginija Wilcox results in a job helping other students experience other countries as well.



Virginija Wilcox wanted to be grounded. The girl next door couldn't play one day because she had been grounded. Wilcox had never been grounded. She asked her mom why and her mom responded that it was never necessary. Wilcox was a good kid and her mom trusted her. This sense of trust her parents had in her and her brothers established personal responsibility, resilience and empowerment from a young age — traits that would impact her for her entire life.

Growing up in 1980s Lithuania under Soviet Union control, Wilcox saw strength and resilience all around her. Like most families at the time, Wilcox's parents struggled to make ends meet, often working multiple jobs such as growing vegetables to sell at the market, raising animals for slaughter or helping others with chores at a farm.

"They were taking it for what it is and making the best out of it," Wilcox said. "No one was complaining, just doing what they had to do."

When Lithuania gained independence from the Soviet Union in 1990, Wilcox saw the difference in her new way of life. Families could go to church, new goods came into the market and the country slowly rebuilt itself.

"Everyone was really grateful that the country was independent and we could do our own things [now]," Wilcox said.

Wilcox has always had a force within her that told her to never give up, but didn't know where that drive came from. Her 89-year-old grandmother, Aldona, is her greatest role model. Aldona's toy as a child was a beet

that she carved a face into. She used empty matchboxes to build structures. She survived multiple government occupations, a World War and drove a horse and carriage to the market to sell grain alone at eight years old — to Wilcox, she is the epitome of resilience.

“What she told me was shocking, but also very empowering, because then I understood a lot of things about myself,” Wilcox said.

Nearly seven years later, with the knowledge of where her own drive and strength comes from, she started her dream career. After a robust interview process and a job offer, the Wilcox family packed up and moved to Minnesota. Wilcox has worked in the Bethel University study abroad office as Associate Dean of International and off-campus programs since March of 2021 — her resilience and drive influencing her every day.

Wilcox studied at Vytautas Magnus University in Lithuania, earning her undergraduate degree in English philology and linguistics, studying the morphology and etymology of words and sentences. She loved learning about it but didn't know what she wanted to do with the degree. That changed one day when she was sitting in a large psychology lecture hall, overhearing some students talking about studying abroad. She was curious, immediately going to talk to the man in charge of the study abroad program to get more information. That day was the deadline to apply for all study abroad programs — she filled out an application on the spot.

“Of course I applied,” Wilcox said. “It was a competition. Only three people could go abroad, and I was selected. And I could choose where to go.”

There was only one program that went to the United States. Wilcox chose it immediately, head filled with visions from the movie “Home Alone” — big cities like New York City, Los Angeles and Miami.

“I had limited knowledge of the United States. I'd never been there. I had no family there. I literally assumed the entire United States is these big city-like locations,” Wilcox said.

Wilcox arrived in Spearfish, South Dakota, in mid-January, temperature in the teens with 17 mph winds. This wasn't Hollywood.

“It was a shock, a really different take. But after that initial shock, I really loved it,” Wilcox said.

She didn't care that she wasn't in a big city like New York or in 80-degree weather like Miami. She just loved the different educational experiences and opportunities. She loved it so much that she extended her stay by a year, meeting her now husband, Mark, during this time.

She and her husband married two years after

Wilcox first arrived in South Dakota. They debated going back to Europe while still in their undergraduate programs, but with his track and cross country schedule, it didn't work out. She ended up transferring full-time and earned her undergraduate degree from Black Hills State University, soon starting work as an office assistant in the international office.

“Then things really lined up,” Wilcox said. “I felt something so strong, like it could be my calling, but I felt like I needed more time and practice to get there.”

She worked in the office for two years while her husband finished his degree, after which both of them applied and were accepted into the graduate program at University of South Dakota on the other side of the state, in the town of Vermillion, population 10,000. Wilcox studied English literature and teaching English literature to American students, but quickly realized that teaching wasn't her calling — international education was. That was all it took for Wilcox.

“I never looked back. When I work in the field of international ed, I feel at home. I don't really count hours,” Wilcox said. “It's my thing.”

Wilcox and her husband stayed in South Dakota, raising their two daughters, Luka and Adria, and waited for a perfect job opportunity with study abroad and international studies to open up. If an opportunity opened up, Wilcox and her husband would follow it, as Wilcox's career was more niche than her husband's job as a physical therapist. One night, Wilcox checked LinkedIn and saw that a job at Bethel University was recommended to her — it was perfect.

Nikki Kang, Assistant Director of the study abroad office, says Wilcox starting in March of 2021 helped them to get caught up with the various programs being canceled or halted due to COVID-19.

“[Wilcox] has been the mastermind of our process,” Kang said. “We're catching up, sending 100 students abroad over interim, 25 over spring semester. We went from zero to 100. It's insane.”

The work Wilcox does at Bethel includes finding new study abroad partners for the university, evaluating existing partnerships between programs, visiting travel sites and discovering what a student's experience will look like, where they will live and what the academic settings are like.

She believes her main responsibility is advocating for students, helping them overcome obstacles that could potentially hold them back from studying abroad. Some of these obstacles include financial aid, COVID restrictions and talking with parents

who are hesitant sending a student abroad.

“She takes everything that she knows and she's experienced...which I think is vital because if you haven't studied abroad, it's hard to advocate for it,” Kang said. “She breaks through barriers.”

Wilcox has found a career that she loves, a passion for helping students to “get out of their bubble.” Her own study abroad experience was life-changing and she wishes every single student would have their own life changing experience.

Wilcox believes that it's hard for high schoolers to answer when they get asked, “What do you want to be?” or “What do you want to study?”

“Unless you're one of the lucky ones who knows what they want to do at age four ... Most of us need time to figure out what our calling is,” Wilcox said. “It's hard to know that when you are surrounded by the noise of all these influences.”

Wilcox believes that noise — whether from parents, grandparents, friends, their hometown, or others — does not necessarily need to be followed.

“How can you know what your true, inner voice is telling you if you're surrounded by this,” Wilcox asked.

Wilcox argues that after high school, the first time students have freedom to be themselves is when and if they go abroad. She believes that there is no better time than a student's undergraduate career to study abroad.

“No other time in your life will you be given a chance like this,” Wilcox said. “The experiences you get being part of a different cultural and academic setting, witnessing how academics are run in a different country, meeting students and hearing their perspectives ... It's so empowering and life-changing.”

She says students will make friends they stay in contact with for the majority of their life. She even found a husband. The impact of these connections and the different academic experience is everlasting, helping a student to find their voice and calling. Wilcox's sister-in-law studied abroad in Spain more than 30 years ago and still stays in touch with the other students she was with, speaking fondly of the experience and country. Wilcox is confident that other students will feel that impact, too, in their own ways.

“[Studying abroad] is the biggest gift you can give yourself or your parents can give you,” Wilcox said. “I'm already starting a savings account for my daughters ... So they can go abroad, too.”

Wilcox won't find herself being grounded any time soon.

Designed by Ariel Dunleavy

Wilcox, her husband, Mark, and their two daughters, Luka and Adria stand over the town of Vilnius, Lithuania, during a family trip in 2021. | *Submitted by Virginija Wilcox*



For more on Wilcox's journey, Check out this video by Logan Murphy

