

## International Development Programs

- [Networking](#)
- [Next Steps](#)
- [My Profile](#)
- [Take Action](#)
- [Travel With World Learning](#)
- [Featured Members](#)

*[Contact us by email.](#)*



### [International Development Programs](#)

#### **Unlocking Potential: Youth Exchange**

"Debunking stereotypes is something I'm really passionate about. This is my calling."

--Cortez Alexander



## International Development Programs

- World Learning International Development Programs aim to bridge the gap between the desire for human development and the ability to achieve that goal.
- Programs with participants from more than 140 countries work to unlock the potential of individuals, communities and institutions to take charge of their own development.

### **Cortez Alexander**

Cortez Alexander got the idea for his blog, "[Breaking Perceptions](#)," after befriendng a group of Iraqi high school students who were visiting Chicago as part of the [Iraqi Young Leader Exchange Program](#), known as IYLEP.

Administered by World Learning and funded through the US Embassy in Baghdad, IYLEP brings together American high school students like Alexander with their Iraqi counterparts. Together, the teens learn important cross-cultural skills, as well as an appreciation for members of other national, ethnic, and religious groups. Last year alone, 46 Iraqi and 20 American high school students participated in IYLEP activities, including leadership workshops, diversity training, and even a White Sox baseball game.

Prior to his participation in IYLEP, Alexander felt he had internalized myths about Iraqis and Arabs as violent extremists or religious fanatics. But after spending a week with the Iraqis, Alexander learned that his new friends shared little in common with the negative stereotypes he saw in the US media.

"All you see in the media are women in burqas or men just out of control," said Alexander, an 18-year-old student at Michele Clark Magnet High School in Chicago. "Not everyone in the Arab world is like that. They watch our movies, they read our classics, they value their education. I also didn't know there were other religions in the Middle East besides Islam. That was definitely a culture shock."

One Iraqi exchange student in particular, whom they nicknamed Meemo, left an indelible impression on Alexander. An 18-year-old from Baghdad, Meemo survived a devastating explosion during the Iraq War, but suffered severe burns and the partial loss of his hearing. Meemo told Alexander how his family coped with such insecurity, as well as the frequent power blackouts during the war.

"I never could have put myself in that position, but other people are going through that on a daily basis," said Alexander. "I really learned a lot about these people and a lot about myself. That was really eye opening for me."

Inspired by this experience, Alexander teamed up with fellow World Learning alum Robyn Williamson to create "[\*\*Breaking Perceptions\*\*](#)." Launched last February, the blog examines myths and stereotypes about people of other nations and cultures, including Iraqis.