



MICHIGAN STATE

UNIVERSITY

ESSAY CONTEST WINNERS

In celebration of the winners of the 2015 International Student and Study Abroad Essay Contests, we hope you will share in their lessons learned through their experiences while at the same time broadening your own world view.

**OFFICE FOR INTERNATIONAL
STUDENTS AND SCHOLARS**

OFFICE OF STUDY ABROAD



OFFICE FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS AND SCHOLARS ESSAY CONTEST

The presence of international students at MSU provides us with extraordinary opportunities to learn about other cultures. MSU is deeply committed to building international understanding through education and is proud to host students from all over the world.

The goal of the International Student Essay Contest is to build greater cross-cultural understanding and to learn from the experiences of international students. Living outside one's own culture can trigger a complex range of feelings that lead to powerful insights. This contest is an opportunity for international students to reflect on their experiences and share their stories as international students at Michigan State University.

MICHIGAN STATE
UNIVERSITY

IN MY SHOES...





FIRST PLACE

“COBBLED SHOES”

VIVEK VELLANKI

HOME COUNTRY: INDIA

Surrounded by friends and family, I frantically tried fitting my life into two large suitcases, squeezing in as much as I could. I realized some things would have to be left out. Abhishek walked up to me and reminded me, for the 67th time in the last four weeks that his mother had also gone to Michigan State University way back in the 1980s. I packed that memory. I wondered about being in the same place, walking the same streets, possibly sitting on the same chairs and only being separated from his mother by three decades. The past has a way of bridging the continental chasm between the present and the future in wondrous ways. These vignettes from my first few weeks at MSU are testimony to that.

At the Detroit airport, Abhijna welcomed me to the United States of America. As we hugged, I was reminded of the first time we met in high school and how, through a combination of fate, chance, and a healthy dose of friendship, we ended up studying in the same universities all along. To be reunited at MSU, through our different PhD programs, was a homecoming of sorts. In that two-hour drive, we had to squeeze in three years' worth of conversations. She had to catch me up on her life in East Lansing and at MSU. I had to take mental notes for my future life.

I began the PhD program by walking into a room filled with 24 new faces and names. The one thing that brought us all together was the decision to pursue a PhD in curriculum, instruction and teacher education. We shared bite-sized pieces of our lives; trying to squeeze our long journeys onto a slide with two sentences. Krista pulled a map from the trunk of her car. Effat had some strings. Each one of us used a unique color to pin all the places from around the world that we had visited. People's strings began in different places—China, India, Australia, Alabama, Mexico—but they all turned to East Lansing. The map was now a riot of colors, strings going across the world, crossing each other, the large seas and carrying in that thread endless seams of stories—stories of the past, present and future; stories of hope, love, and despair; stories that transgress

boundaries, cultures and politics; stories that each one of us will share over the next five years.

After our first class, we decided to walk to the MSU diary store. We queued up outside, waiting for our turn. Conversations with the person in front and behind served as additional toppings. Tashal and I looked at the pictures on the wall. One in particular caught our attention. It was a black and white photo of a few MSU students standing in front of a cow, drinking milk. We laughed. What an outlandish idea! Maybe not. I was reminded when, in some cities in India, freshly harvested milk was preferred over packaged milk. I was fourteen and on the odd weekend my dad would walk me to the place where cows were milked. Tashal and I wondered if that could still be possible, here and now. We laughed a little more, mostly in wonderment and amused by the ways in which time alters cultural practices, even across continents.

Danny suggested we go mushroom hunting over the weekend. I hadn't heard of that before. Pleasantly bemused, I agreed. We headed to Baker Woodlot. He walked briskly, turning his head both ways to present the woods with a studied gaze. He stopped and I almost ran into him. Excited, he pointed towards a bright orange mushroom and proclaimed, “Chicken of the Woods!” I was thrilled. I had seen a few different kinds of mushrooms but the only ones that I had eaten were the buttons. He put it into the basket; we took it home. Chicken of the Woods from Baker Woodlot cooked with Indian spices. Danny liked the choice of using Indian spices and I was thrilled at discovering this edible mushroom. Our palates were busy discovering this mélange—of foods, spices, hobbies and culture.

As I sat in the graduate study room, trying to complete the readings for my class, Hannah nudged me. She held a card in her hand. It read, “Blessed is the one who brings compassion to the earth and all its creatures. Happy New Year.” She wanted us to join her in celebrating the Jewish New Year, Rosh Hashanah. We spoke about the festival



“COBBLED SHOES”

CONTINUED

and the rituals around it. She told me about Yom Kippur, a day of repentance and for reflecting on the year gone by and the future ahead. It felt like a lovely ritual to think about the past, how that has shaped the present and ways in which a more peaceful future can be imagined for all. I thanked her, for the card, for sharing her festival, and most of all for the hope she carried so earnestly—may the year ahead bring peace to all.

Rohit and I were in Sparty’s, having a conversation over lunch. We started by talking about teacher professional development and the various ways in which it is being practiced and researched. His eyes glanced towards my burger. I knew what he was thinking about. As we sat there and I ate my cheeseburger, people in India are being lynched over the consumption of beef. The Indian state has curbed the sale of beef in a few states and in others there is a violent moral policing. We spoke about

Rachel explained to me the rules of American football that she knew. Between scanning the web to understand the other rules and watching the TV, we managed to catch bits of the game. She had a measured disinterest in the game and I was completely ignorant. We made a good team but felt out of place amongst all the excited Spartan fans sporting their green and white. As the game came to a close with only ten seconds left on the clock and the Spartans trailing the Wolverines by two points, a silence cut through the place. In those ten seconds, the game turned. The place erupted, strangers doled out high-fives and hugs. We walked out only to be greeted with more laughter, high-fives and cheer. We smiled and I told her about the time when India had won the cricket world cup and a similar response gripped the whole country. She told me about the first time she saw a couch on fire in the streets. She was twelve years old. As we walked the streets, we tried to make sense of this in our

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the courage, compassion, and faith in humanity displayed by several writers who protested this turn of events by returning the literary awards presented to them by the Indian state. As for our own selves, we felt confused. Now that we lived in the US, were we outsiders? But would we ever be insiders in the US either? Rohit gently pointed towards the sticker on my laptop which read “Human existence cannot be silent”. It reminded me of the power of conversations, of stories—an exchange between a teller and a listener that carries with it the possibility of real human connection, seeds of hope and the possibility of social change.

own ways. I caught myself reminiscing about Abhishek’s mom. I wondered how she had experienced her time at MSU. I decided to write to her and to share with her my experience of being here, being in my shoes.

Shoes are cobbled out of people’s stories and out of the past, present, and future; helping me travel across time, cultures, and space. These shoes are not my own, they are yours too. As I think about spending the next few years at MSU, my wish is that we continue adding stories, love, and hope to each other’s shoes; so that we may build bridges instead of walls.



SECOND PLACE

“SAY BYE TO UTILITY”

JIATONG LI

HOME COUNTRY: CHINA

The last day of August seemed to be a plain day in a year, but for me, it was different. Dragging two heavy suitcases alone, and saying good-bye to every family member, I boarded on the flight from Beijing to Detroit, left the city which I lived for 8 years, and fled to US, a brand new country, to start my university life as an international freshman.

During the lonely 13-hour trip, I thought back the whole process that led me to make the final decision—pursue undergraduate degree in US. I knew it was extremely tough for me to make up my mind to finally choose this option, and I had struggled and considered a lot before I made final decision.

‘Jiatong, you’d better finish your undergraduate degree in US,’ said my friend who, a junior student in a Chinese university, was preparing to apply for a US graduate school. ‘If you pursue undergraduate degree in US, it is much easier to apply for a better US graduate school than do that in a Chinese university, at least you are not required to hand in TOEFL scores.’ ‘Jiatong, you must go to a US undergraduate school,’ said my grandma who always encouraged me to study abroad, ‘In Beijing, you are not competitive enough if you lack of overseas education background.’ These comments were like a towing, which dragged me to choose to pursue undergraduate degree in US. I was not sure whether this choice was my favorite one, but I was extremely sure this choice could bring me most benefits. ‘Just accept it,’ I said to myself, ‘It is good to your career, and you can make it.’

Before I arrived in US, I thought I would have an extremely hard time adapting life in a new school in a brand new country. However, I was immediately attracted by the beautiful and resourceful campus at the beginning of the semester.

In the Neighborhood Engagement Center, I wandered through the Resource Fair with my new Indian friend, and

I was totally attracted by the abundant resources. During OISS Coffee Hour, I chatted with other international students from various countries, and it was also the first time that I introduced Beijing to people outside China. Thanks to the friendly and patient tutor in MLC, I clearly distinguished confusing definitions, and received a full score in my first math exam. Inside the Wharton Center, I watched a great concert played by Lang Lang--a famous Chinese pianist. I had never imagined that I could see a concert played by a Chinese star outside China.

Besides great resources, I also benefit from my American friends. They are very friendly and never laugh at my nonstandard English. They tell me tips about how to spend cold winter, and they are curious about the pronunciation of my Chinese name. Thanks to the wonderful resources and great help with my friends, I adapted new life quickly and gradually enjoyed the new life here.

Though everything went well, even much better than I imagined, I still kept my purpose to come to US so firmly in mind that I have already clearly planned my 4-year university life: always studying hard to get a high GPA and satisfactory GMAT scores, and getting internship chance from famous companies to enrich my resume. I thought that I would regard ‘entering a satisfactory graduate school’ as the greatest goal in these 4 years and get ready to fight for it.

However, a workshop changed my mind.

One day, I took part in a workshop talking about how to get in a graduate school. I joined in without hesitation for I cared about everything related to graduate school. In the workshop, the first two questions we were asked were—why do you want to get in a graduate school? Do you really like the programs in graduate school?

I was stupefied at that time, because In China, I was never asked about, and I had never thought about them before. It was extremely hard for me to give specific answers



“SAY BYE TO UTILITY”

CONTINUED

at once. Why do I want to go in to a graduate school? To be competitive to get a better career or earn more money? I am not sure, but I am only sure that I should go to graduate school. Do I like those programs? I never learned more about them!

It was the first time that I carefully thought about my purpose to go to a graduate school, and even my purpose to come to US. Finally I realized that I was too utilitarian, like many Chinese.

Many Chinese people are so utilitarian that they devote a lot to something which they think that may bring lots of benefits, instead of asking themselves why and whether they like or not. Sometimes, they fail to consider whether it is worthwhile to pursue so-called benefits. However, finally when they get what they dream of with their great efforts, they are not as happy as they have imagined. It is significant to think about what we want to gain from those so-called benefits, and whether those benefits are really beneficial to ourselves.

Compared to some utilitarian Chinese including myself, my American friends major in their favorite subjects, and do something they really enjoy. They major in physics only because they really enjoy doing research and they are eager to be a scientist. Life is short, and it is extremely important to give up the utilitarian mind pursuing so-called benefits, and please stop to think about and do what we like instead.

The happy life in MSU still goes on, and I still keep joining in different activities to enrich my life. I participated in a PhD research to learn a new problem-solving skill, not for a compensation of 10 dollars, but for I really want to learn something new that may bring me convenience in my daily life. I visited the Study Abroad Fair and intended to apply for certain programs, not for adding a shining point in my CV or resume, but for I was really curious about a brand new culture.

Looking back to process that I made the final decision, I find it a bit of ridiculous. However, I never regret with this

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Also, I know most Chinese students join in Broad College, but I am not sure whether they like business or not. Some students think it is useful to learn a practical major to earn more money, some say if they major in business, they can easily take in charge of the company operated by their parents. I regret to say that I seldom know someone who majors in business just due to their personal interest.

option, because it gives me another chance to re-organize my future, gives me enough time and resources to consider what I really enjoy, and encourages me to bravely pursue what I really like.

Life is not long, and it is time to say bye to utility. It cannot be better and it is also never too late to be ourselves!



THIRD PLACE

“LIVING MY DREAM”

HAFSA SHARIFF ABASS

HOME COUNTRY: KENYA

Being born in a traditional semi-Somali family translated into an inflexible cultural background. A background that largely scorns girl-child education and predominantly sets the girl child's worth in the maternal bracket. In my family of twelve (eight girls and four boys), it was a bruising struggle of breathing space from the word “go”! My mother did not get any kind of formal education and my sisters did not escape the trap of our conservative family set-up either. Fortunately, I am the ninth born in my family and this meant great support from my sisters who were so dismal with their situations (they were all pushed into early marriages). This made them very determined to see me through school. “We want to live our dreams through you”, they would remind me often times. Even though, their hopes in me always made me feel pressurized, it gave me the strength to resolve for nothing but the very best.

Broad College of Business is the BEST I had always yearned for, but majority of my friends and family thought I was being over ambitious. My high school principal strongly discouraged me from applying to MSU insisting that only presidents' and executives' kids get the opportunity to study in America. Demoralized, I wanted to give up, but Warren Buffet's quote, “People will always try to stop you from doing the right thing if it is unconventional”, gave me the audacity to believe in myself and to apply to this great school. I knew rather too well that it was atypical for girls in my family to hope for high school education (not college), it was even more “ridiculous” to dream of studying in America. As my brothers would put it, “Girls fantasize a lot and thus can't differentiate fantasy from reality”.

Days changed to weeks, weeks to months, and the long-awaited day finally reached. I was going to MSU! No, I was not day dreaming. This was real: a triumph unimaginable by any girl in my family. On August 16th at the Jomo Kenyatta International Airport in Nairobi, a mixture of emotions engulfed me. I was happy to take the next big step of my life, but sad to leave my family. Remaining in my comfort zone, though, was a luxury that I could not

afford. As I was walking inside the airport with a sunken heart, I looked back one last time and my five-year old niece shouted, “Say hi to President Obama”. This made me make no effort to stop tears from flushing out of my eyes. It made me realize that I owed my nieces the hope of getting education beyond primary school. And to my mom and sisters, I had instilled a sense of pride in them. In simple words, MSU represented more than just college; it represented hope and pride.

Inside the plane, I felt scared. Scared of the uncertainty that lay before me. Will my home for the next four years be all that I dreamt and hoped for? What about all the Islamophobic stuff I had seen in news countless times? The thought of discrimination freaked me out. The reality was now dancing right in front of my eyes. Coming from a small town in Kenya, the thought of a university with a population of 50,000 made me feel like my brain was coated with a layer of Vaseline! I could not think straight anymore. I assumed there would be some sickening queue everywhere I went: from the cafeteria to the bus station to the restrooms. My heartbeat increased aggressively and I wished I could jump off the plane and run back home.

At the Lansing Airport, we (I used “we” because I was travelling with three other Kenyans) were welcomed by some of the university's MasterCard Foundation Program team. The warm, welcoming expressions on their faces made me breath a sigh of relief: a breath that I was nervously holding in my chest for the whole 26 hours journey.

“How was the journey?” Dr. Isaac Kalumbu asked.

“Nerve-wracking”, my heart whispered, but I decided to compose myself. I mean I was not going to confide into strangers: good manners taught me not to, my culture trained me not to! Instead, a faint “It was good”, slipped from my lips.

The drive to campus was one filled with bliss. The environment was so beautiful and quite. I enjoyed the silence more than anything else. In any street in Kenya, one would hear all kinds of noise: from goats' bleating



“LIVING MY DREAM”

CONTINUED

to matatus' (public transport vehicles) deafening music to hawkers noisily advertising their merchandise. This is when it dawned on me that I was in America. Yes, America! I was not fantasizing; I was living the moment. It felt great to finally be where my heart was.

The Brody Square is beautiful I confess. The food, though, left me wondering if I had left my taste buds in Kenya. The potatoes tasted weird, and the eggs' taste was even worse. What was more frightening was the spinach: some uncooked tiny leaves were tagged spinach! And its taste convinced me that it was the worst thing that ever happened to human kind. I knew spinach as huge-leafed vegetables that are chopped into tiny pieces and fried. Almost everything else in the cafeteria was scaring and strange. I resorted to cereals for breakfast and fries for both lunch and dinner. After a week long of feeling frustrated, I realized the only way out was to develop a positive

major specific classes. Again, this was no daydream!

I am an introvert, or as my sisters would say a “social-dwarf” and I thought fitting in college would be very difficult. But, behold! I was in for a surprise. Everyone was so nice and making friends was easier than has ever been in my life. It all started with my cohort members at the IAOP; we did a lot of icebreakers (totally alien word to me), which helped us learn more about each other. The icebreakers reduced a lot of tensions that had inundated us. It gave us the chance to talk about ourselves openly and confidently. By the end of the IAOP, I had more than a dozen friends: an achievement that never crossed my mind before.

A lover of books, I found myself eagerly waiting for the Andrew Carnegie Medals for Excellence in Fiction and Nonfiction winners often times. I would thus read the winning authors' books to increase my knowledge broad

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attitude and an open mind to everything. From then on I tried something different each time I went to the cafeteria. Somehow, my taste buds “flew” from home and back into my mouth and the foods' taste tremendously improved.

The IAOP week was the beginning of my long-awaited college life. We learned a lot about the American education system, how to deal with culture shock, the safety rules among other things. Only then did I understand why I was going to take an Applied Environmental and Organismal Biology (ISB 202) class. It is a university requirement! This really amazed me because I am a business major and was wondering why I was enrolled in such a class in my schedule builder. I learnt that MSU strives to ensure that its graduates are all-rounded. I felt even more blessed when I learned that I could also enroll in a writing class! Writing has always been my most special hobby, and the opportunity of honing my skills meant the world to me. In the Kenyan Higher Education System, though, one can only enroll in his or her

base. This year (2015), I read Bryan Stevenson's winning JUST MERCY as it had won the nonfiction medal. I immediately fell in love with it because it inspired me in a way that no other book did in my whole life! It became a part of me since last summer. It never crossed my mind, though, that I would ever get the opportunity of meeting Bryan in person. Little did I know that MSU had a lifetime surprise for me: Bryan Stevenson was invited to the 2015 Fall Convocation! For a moment there my brain stopped working; I could not fathom seeing Bryan in person. Oh! This was too much for me. On that morning of August 31st, 2015 I could hardly take breakfast because my stomach was full of “butterflies”. I was so anxious that I could not differentiate if I was just dreaming or it was real. But then everything was so real Bryan came to MSU! Yes, he did address us directly from his lips and not just from his writings. That moment confirmed the ultimate truth to me: I am a Spartan and the sky is just the beginning.



Office for International Students and Scholars

After two long weeks of being disconnected from the world, I was finally at BestBuy to get my SIM card. One lady approached me with a big a smile on her face and asked how she could help me. I was impressed by her politeness (something I was not used to) and told her that I wanted a SIM card. She asked me to choose my carrier. "What is a carrier?" I was utterly dumbfounded! I insisted that I was not there for any "carrier" and all I needed was a SIM card. She also looked confused and this made me realize that something was amiss. Excusing myself, I left the shop and went back to my residence hall feeling silly. Once in my room, I searched the word "carrier" in Google

only to realize that it is exactly what we call "line" in Kenya. From that day on, I formed a rapport with Google. I would search up anything that I was not sure of lest I make a buffoon of myself.

Adapting to a totally new environment is never a piece of cake, but MSU gave me the rare opportunity of feeling appreciated and at home. Being a Spartan is my biggest feat, my biggest pride, and my biggest manifestation of hope. Yes, green blood does flow though my veins and this is no fantasy, I promise!



OFFICE OF STUDY ABROAD ESSAY CONTEST

MSU is proud to have one of the nation’s largest study abroad programs – one that spans the world and helps to build international understanding through education.

The annual Study Abroad Essay Contest aims to capture the essence of study abroad by encouraging students to reflect and write creatively about the unique living and learning experiences that study abroad provides.

Studying outside of the U.S.A. produces powerful insights into the differences among the cultures of the world and deeper understanding of our own culture(s). Writing and submitting an essay gives students the opportunity to reflect on, and share, their experiences so we may grow our own understanding of the world and our place in it.





Office of Study Abroad Essay Contest

FIRST PLACE

“A UNIVERSAL LANGUAGE”

JOHN NOWAK

STUDY ABROAD LOCATION: SPAIN

On my final night in Santander, Spain I choked back tears as I said my final goodbye to my friends. I am always the emotional one in the group, and this night was no different. Still, I knew my friends were also sad to part ways. We had shared so many memories and I had learned so much from them. We played music together, they took me to barbecues in the country, I met their friends and families and — unlike my friends from Michigan State — I wasn't going to see them after I returned home. For seven weeks, I was the temporary keyboard player for a local band called the Groovin' Beards. I learned 17 songs, practiced with the band for hours on end, performed for more than 100 people and we all became best friends. My Spanish improved exponentially during my time in Spain, but with Santi, Quique, Gustavo and Luis, I found another way to communicate: through music.

I met the Groovin' Beards the first Saturday night we were in Santander, at a bar called Tia María. When my MSU friends left, I stayed behind to talk with my new friends, Quique and Santi. The owner of the bar, Mario, had introduced us, and less than a minute into conversation, we discovered we were all musicians and had many favorite artists in common. We gave each other suggestions to listen to, discussed our favorite Grover Washington Jr. song and talked about our own bands. We hung out and talked about Frank Zappa, Spain and the beaches of Santander until the morning hours, as the conversation flowed and I tried to keep up with my strong but timid Spanish skills. The next night, I joined them on stage, playing the drums in front of a crowd of 50-plus strangers, and two nights later, the bass player Luis shouted, “You're in the band!”

This improbable four-day whirlwind of landing myself in a Spanish band was hard to believe and hard to explain to my classmates. On the Tuesday before my first rehearsal with the band, I told some friends I couldn't go to the beach because I had band practice. I heard, “Band practice?” and “With who?” and “You play an instrument?” and even, “You're getting in the car with random guys you met at the bar four days ago?!” No matter how I tried, I could not effectively put into words how perfectly I got along with

these guys. I told my classmates that after the first night of jamming with my new band mates that it was like we were best friends. After just five days in Spain, I had found the local group of people I shared the most in common. I found the strange, foreign and exciting place in the world that I would fit into for the next seven weeks. I found a part of the Santander community that I would grow to be a part of, and that would be the hardest thing to say goodbye to when my time in Spain was up.

Through music, I connected with complete strangers 3,939 miles away from home. My hard work and studies at MSU for four years prepared me to go to Spain and talk with natives, and the incredible study abroad program I was involved in and the teachers and directors I worked with gave me the freedom, confidence and opportunity to get involved in my new community. I was proud of the amount of Spanish I was speaking with them, but music was the language through which we were truly communicating.

Weeks passed and each day was better than the one before. I did my best to take full advantage of my time in Santander, the resources I was provided, and the new relationships I had made since arriving. Every now and then as I was walking through the streets with my new band, I would look around, take in my surroundings, and smile. Through my new friends I met even more local musicians, music fans and natives of the city. Every Sunday night I participated in an “open jam” at a bar where 15 local musicians would play music all night, like a continuous game of musical chairs. The community took me in — a random, bearded American college student — and treated me like one of their own local musicians. Having played in the Lansing and Grand Rapids local music scenes for my entire life, it felt surreal to be inserted and welcomed into a similar community in a foreign country. My experience is a perfect example of how music can bring people together and how it can connect people of all kinds all over the world. We had some conversations in Spanish, we had some conversations in English, but once the music started, we communicated purely through feeling, expression, and creativity.



“A UNIVERSAL LANGUAGE”

CONTINUED

Since returning to the United States, I've kept in touch with the Groovin' Beards and other musicians I met in Spain. We share YouTube videos of songs or artists we like, talk about our upcoming gigs and reminisce of the days that I was a part of their band. I am so lucky these four men let me into their creative space, an outlet where they go to forget about their long day at work or the fight they've had with their girlfriend. As a lifelong musician, I can say that when you're in that space, everything feels right. Not only did they let me into this space, they wanted me to be there. It's humbling to think that as much as I learned from them about the Spanish language, music, and life, they learned from me, too. This

abroad program, there was a reason we met at Tia Maria on that Saturday night, and there was a reason an old dusty keyboard was sitting in their closet waiting to be used.

Through music, I expanded my knowledge of the language, the culture of Spain and the people who live there. This powerful and universal language allowed me to feel at home in a foreign city. As I look back on my time spent in Spain, I remember my final project for SPN 452: Teaching Spanish as a Second Language. I used music as a theme for my final presentation — a lesson plan I created to teach a class vocabulary, verbs and grammar. How could I use instrument names to effectively expand a student's vocabulary (drums

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rewarding and comforting recognition of reciprocity and learning is exactly what makes music so powerful.

I'm confident that even if I didn't speak a lick of Spanish, I would still have met Santi, Quique, Luis and Gustavo and ended up playing music with them. Night after night, we would talk about how it felt like the stars had aligned for us. There was a reason I chose Santander as my study

are “la batería”)? How could I use verbs like “to sing” (cantar) to demonstrate verb conjugation in a fun and creative way? This lesson plan came easily to me, and I had a ton of fun presenting to my class. It makes sense, because I was really just teaching them everything the Groovin' Beards taught me. And yes, we're already planning a reunion tour.



Office of Study Abroad Essay Contest

SECOND PLACE

“THINKING GREEN”

JACKIE GUZMAN

STUDY ABROAD LOCATION: COSTA RICA

Before going to Costa Rica this past summer, I had already started to learn some general ideas about environmentalism. Starting in elementary school, I can often recall lessons involving the mantra of “reduce, reuse, recycle.” During my freshman year at MSU, I was able to learn a lot more about environmentalism, especially as it relates to food. For instance, I took a writing class that focused on the problems of the food system in the US. We learned how detrimental chemical-heavy, industrial farming can be to our health and to our environment and what buying organic really means. During the same semester, I also took a Cuban history class and learned how farming there was almost exclusively organic and pesticide-free.

Despite peaking my interests with these courses, a lot of the ideas of environmentalism still felt very far-off. My family and I try to buy healthy and organic foods, but options at local supermarkets tend to be somewhat limited. I also do not own a farm and gardening in Michigan can prove somewhat challenging when half the year you cannot even see the grass because of all the ice and snow. I really did want to practice an environmentally sustainable lifestyle, but felt that I had little control and was not sure where to start.

Little did I know that living the environmentally-sound lifestyle that I imagined is actually much more doable than I thought. In fact, I was able to live it myself during my two-month stay in Costa Rica.

In my first month there, I stayed just outside the capital of San José and took Spanish classes in the morning. Afternoons were filled with Arts and Humanities classes, where we learned about the ethics of ecotourism and sustainability. During the second month, my fellow students and I had to put what we learned into practice by participating in civic engagement activities throughout the country. We were paired up, put on a bus, and sent off.

Lucky for me, I was placed in the mountains of Monteverde, in a smaller town called Cañitas. The assignment my partner and I were given was to work on an ecotouristic coffee farm called LIFE. We were to help out with daily activities, including feeding the animals, weeding, and helping with group tours. During my time there, I was able to learn about how easily sustainable practices can be implemented on a farm and into anyone’s everyday life.

In Cañitas, I learned more than I ever could have in a classroom alone. One crucial message was the importance of not being wasteful. On the farm, for instance, there was a strong emphasis on not wasting electricity. Everything that could be done without using it was done. Since we were on the side of a mountain, no water pumps were needed as water was continually flowing downstream, right next to the farm. Along with this, water was collected in rain barrels so that none of it would be squandered. This could then be used for crops, drinking water for animals, and to clean cars or tools.

More than just not wasting our natural resources, I learned about the importance of repairing the environment. The Monteverde area is a cloud forest, but much of the forest has been cut down and replaced with buildings and tourist commodities or pastures for dairy farming. For example, next to LIFE farm is another large patch of land that used to be used for dairy farming. The owner has recently scaled down but still owns the land and has simply left it empty. Since nothing productive was being done to the land, the workers at LIFE talked to the owner and asked if they could reforest it. The owner said yes. Now, every time a student group visits the farm, they are giving a baby tree to plant in the neighboring vacant land. This is such a vital idea, that our mantra mentioned in the beginning should have the word “restore” added to it.

The farm also works on preserving patches of forest within its own land. Guillermo, one of the owners, told me that all farmers should keep forest near them, if at all possible,



“THINKING GREEN” CONTINUED

because nature is one of the greatest teachers. He told me a story about his experience with ant invasions. In the forest, there are a lot of leaf-cutter ants. Because there are large patches of forest on the farm, these ants can easily find their way to the coffee plants. He brought me over to a particular patch of land that, from afar, appeared to be the muddy red of a brick. As we got closer, I noticed that the ground was not covered in dirt, but in ants. There must have been thousands here and they had taken over the surrounding coffee plants. They were crawling up and down the branches and had stripped it bare.

Guillermo told me that often, with ant invasions like this, farmers are inclined to spray their crops with some sort of pesticide to keep the plants alive. Guillermo, concerned as he is with nature, decided to let it run its course. What he found is that the leaf cutter ants do much more than

back to their local community. This could be as simple as buying and selling at their local farmers market or as involved as helping high school students design and carry out science research projects on the farm and in the forests. LIFE also placed a high value on education. All the farmers were constantly learning in the classroom. They enrolled in different types of ecology and science courses and many were also working on learning English.

Before becoming an owner of LIFE, Guillermo was actually a teacher himself. One of his goals of the farm is to educate its visitors. Guillermo and his family are able to see firsthand the effects of deforestation and how this is destroying our earth. One person cannot change the world alone, and it is only through spreading this knowledge and these experiences that others can learn to leave the world a better place.

“During my two months in Costa Rica this past summer, I learned that environmentally responsible living is not only possible, but really not that difficult to achieve. Instead of simply worrying about current consumption, we should think about ways of giving back and helping others. We should support our families, friends, and local communities in every way that we can. Most importantly, we should think about how our actions today will affect the world of tomorrow.”

just cut leaves. They dig deep into the dirt, mix it up, and eventually create fertile clay. They don't often take up large amounts of space on the farm, maybe enough to span six coffee plants (and this farm has thousands), and after a few months they will move onto the next set of plants. Normally, the coffee plants live through this process, though they do not bear fruits until the next season. The clay that results can be mixed with other dirt and used as compost to spread throughout the farm, and it can also be used for pottery, which is super convenient because Guillermo's wife has her own studio at home. If the forest were not next door and nature did not meddle its way into the farm, the productivity of these ants may never have been discovered. What Guillermo showed was an admirable respect for nature that I hope to exercise myself.

Along with preserving and restoring nature, the farmers at LIFE also strongly believed in the importance of giving

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We now have a new set of Rs to teach elementary school students: not just reduce, reuse, and recycle, but also restore and respect. With this in mind, I am now convinced more than ever of the importance of implementing ecological practices into our everyday lives. I now feel empowered to change the future and impact the lives around me to help restore and respect the world around us.



THIRD PLACE

“AMA LA VIDA”

NICOLE CADY

STUDY ABROAD LOCATION: ECUADOR

“Ecuadorians are strange and unique beings, sleeping peacefully amidst smoldering volcanoes, the poor living amongst unimaginable wealth, and finding joy from sorrowful songs.” – Alexander Von Humboldt (translated from Spanish)

Coming into the program in Quito, Ecuador, I was a fresh Zoology graduate with a Spanish minor and had just been denied to the school of my dreams, UC Davis College of Veterinary Medicine. I had worked so hard the last four years to earn a 3.94 GPA and gain thousands of hours of relevant experience only to have the finish line disappear

24 active volcanoes in a country the size of Nevada that inspires an attitude of not taking any day for granted. Thousands relentlessly protesting in the streets against the government’s policies, my classmate’s family spending their grocery money on a vet bill for a stray dog, my single host mother working a second unpaid job to bring clean water to indigenous villages – I witnessed firsthand an unwavering sense of community and determination, even in the face of unimaginable political and economic hardship. It is by their example that I took on a new perspective of the world for the beautiful life that fills it and focused on what I can change, instead of lingering on what I cannot.

“While traveling across Ecuador, I was taken aback at how such a small country could contain such a diversity of life and landscapes. From spotting toucans and howler monkeys as I trekked through the wet Amazon jungle to creeping up on the gargantuan Galapagos Tortoises, Earth’s incredible biodiversity had jumped off the pages of a textbook and surrounded me in vivid color. With a full heart, I found myself realizing, “This is why I study life.” But more importantly, I felt moved to push myself further to preserve the beautiful life I was seeing, especially that which is in danger of vanishing forever. ”

before me. Combined with ill-timed circumstances at home, I fell into a depression and was diagnosed a month before I was to leave for my study abroad. I was lost at sea and didn’t know where to swim. My incredible experience in Ecuador, however, brought me back to shore and renewed my sense of purpose. My time in Ecuador opened my mind to the beauty and fleetingness of the world around me. The Ecuadorian people showed me what it means to love life, embodying their national slogan “Ama la Vida.” The world-renowned biodiversity I witnessed ignited my true passion of conserving Earth’s endangered species. Above all, I learned to embrace the unexpected and never stop pushing towards my dreams.

I am the person I am today because of the lessons I learned from the Ecuadorian people. Perhaps it is the

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“AMA LA VIDA” CONTINUED

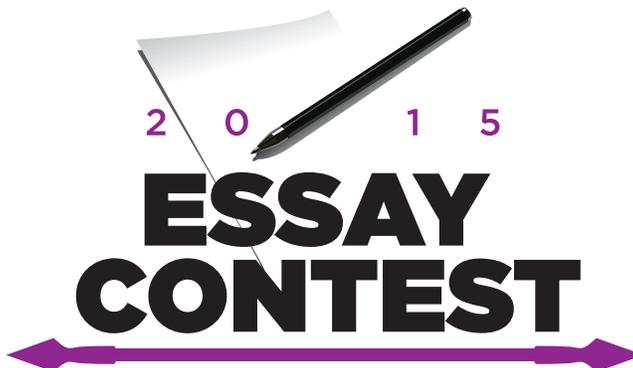
At a pivotal crossroads in my life, Ecuador tossed me into a different vantage point and helped me remember where my passions lie. I studied for and retook the GRE in Ecuador and reapplied to veterinary programs. I relentlessly applied to internships for my gap year and have been accepted into a position in Ya'an, China at the Bifengxia Panda Reserve to assist in research on increasing captive breeding success of Giant Pandas. The fiery passion I had lost had been returned to me. I felt so moved by the embodiment of the national slogan by the Ecuadorian people that I even got my first tattoo of “Ama La Vida” to remind myself of the life-changing effect it has had on me.

Today I try to spread this empowering attitude to others by encouraging them to pursue what they are truly passionate about and step out of their comfort zone. When I feel that stormy cloud of fear and doubt creeping in and blinding me from the goals on my horizon, I remember that ray of sunshine that is simply loving life. Ecuador has inspired me to pursue wildlife conservation through my veterinary path and given me an international dimension to my future career. I will continue to push myself towards my full potential, follow my heart, and always Ama la vida.

IN MY SHOES...



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