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University of
New Hampshire

International Educator

The Newsletter of UNH Global Engagement

Fall 2014

MI FAMILIA:

A PARENT'S OWN IMMERSION INTO THE DEEP LEARNING OF STUDY ABROAD

Contributed by Charlene Joyce

I've always considered our family to be global thinkers. My son, Mackintosh Willingham, (UNH '15 Theatre) has been traveling since he was a week old. By the time he was six he had seen most of the United States and a great deal of Europe. Needless to say, it didn't come as any big surprise when Mack announced that he intended to fulfill his foreign language requirement by studying abroad.

"Great!" I said. "Where in Spain would you like to go? Don't forget that your cousins are in Madrid," I said hopefully. "I don't want to go to Spain, Mom," he replied. "I want to go to Argentina." My heart sank.

Argentina is 5,436 miles from our home—requiring a two hour ride to Boston, a 45 minute flight to New York, a 14 hour direct flight into BAE and a 1 hour ride into the city of Buenos Aires. It was daunting to think of my only child being so far away for 4 months. Every "what if" situation ran through my mind. Aside from the obvious concern about big city dangers, especially in a foreign country, would he be able to handle the language barrier? What was the best way to exchange money? Would someone look out for him? What would his hosts be like? Would his classes be of the caliber of those at UNH? What if something happened...could someone get to him in time? Yes...I was having serious reservations about his choice.



Mack and his host mother Marcella

"But Mom...there are a group of us going. I'll be fine. Besides, I'll be able to fulfill my language and history requirements. Whenever we travel as a family, you always insist that we live amongst the locals. This is no different. By the way...you've always wanted to learn to Tango, haven't you? Well...here's your chance when you come to visit." I reluctantly agreed to let him go.

Mack left New Hampshire on March 1st, 2014. It was the hardest goodbye of my life. I didn't sleep all night—instead opting to track his flight online. I could see that he had arrived safely. Then, with crossed fingers, hoping the taxi was there to pick him up, I waited for him to Facetime me, letting me know how he was doing. A couple of hours later, the call came through. There was Mack, big as life, with a cat on his lap. "This is Renata," he said. "Who is that woman waving wildly in the background?" I asked. That's Marcella,

my host mother. She's a lot like you. I like her already!"

We Facetimed with Mack on a weekly basis, where he updated us on life in South America. He adored his host mother. In fact, he noted many similarities between Marcella and me. "You know, Mom, I used to think you were a pain in the butt when you made me call to check in. Guess what? Marcella does the same thing! It must be a mom thing." It was obvious, like Mack and me, that they had become the best of friends, right from the start.

Marcella often participated in our Facetime conversations. Since my husband Fred and I don't speak Spanish, Mack was forced to translate, which added another layer to his experience. Marcella is clearly passionate about hosting exchange students. For her it is a personal investment. She requires her guests to be home every night for dinner in an effort to increase their conversational skills, and, if they decide to stay out late, she expects a call. She includes them in family events. After meeting her, I felt very confident that we had made the right choice.

In May, Fred and I traveled to Buenos Aires for a two-week visit with Mack. We were impressed. Marcella's apartment in Belgrano was not only in a safe neighborhood, but fantastic. Never in our wildest dreams did we expect such a fabulous living situation. Belgrano is a wonderful neighborhood filled with interesting shops and a wide array of restaurants which, by American standards would be considered elegant, at a fraction of the cost. Belgrano is home to Buenos Aires' version of Broadway. It is also a short subway ride from the Pink Palace downtown and famous landmarks as Recoleta, where such notables as Eva Peron is buried.



Iguazu Falls in Argentina

When we arrived, Mack's ability to communicate in Spanish had become astounding. He had successfully found spots with the best exchange rate, knew all the great places to eat and took us on tours of local attractions and the university with the ease of a bonafide tour guide. Most importantly, we got to meet Marcella. She was lovely. Like us, Marcella has a great appreciation of the arts. She loves music, film, museums and the theatre. As part of the production team for the movie *On Golden Pond*, Fred and I were invited guests at the Buenos Aires opening. We decided to bring Marcella and Mack, as we felt that this would be a great way to introduce her to our lives in New England—especially considering that we had invited her to our home for vacation. Marcella couldn't believe that we “lived in the forest.” She also couldn't believe her good fortune in getting to meet three of South America's biggest stars.

After we left, Mack did a tremendous amount of traveling. Two of the trips were included in the program—one to Iguazu Falls (some of the most spectacular scenery you will ever see) and the other to the Tigre. It would be an understatement to say that his semester studying abroad was anything less than a raging success, his life enriched in ways that defy description. He now has a sense of place in the world, independent of us.

The day after Mack returned home, I got the following email from Marcella:

“I am very sad and I cannot believe Mack is at home! It is very strange, Mack and I hugged very strong when

he parted this morning and both felt how much we love. I have to adapt he do not live with me. It will take time, but thank God for having known you, Fred and Mack, you are wonderful people. By the way, I buy my ticket. I arrive Boston on Sept. 29.”

It is fair to say that Mack was sad, too. While he didn't suffer from reverse culture shock, he missed Marcella terribly. He also missed his extended family; Marcella's son Pablo and her twin sister, Mary, had also made a conscious effort to become part of his life. Yes...they are his second family—half a world away.



At premier of On Golden Pond in Buenos Aires (l. to r.): Mack Willingham, Fred Willingham, Pepe Soriano, Charlene Joyce, Claudia LaPaco, Emilia Mazur, and Marcella Fernandez. Pepe and Claudia are the two biggest stars in South America. Claudia went on to win the South American version of an Oscar two weeks after this picture was taken.

On Friday, September 29th, Mack and I picked up Marcella at Logan International Airport. During the week she was here, her heart's desire was to sit in on a class at UNH. She wanted to see what “her son” was learning. Much to Marcella's delight, Mack's teacher was gracious enough to accommodate this request. While we had a wonderful week of leaf peeping, hiking, shopping, gourmet dinners as well as a visit with Ernest Thompson, the author of *On Golden Pond* (yes...she got her picture holding the Oscar) it is fair to say that spending time at UNH was the highlight of her visit.

During her stay, our Spanish and her English improved. We were interested to hear her talk about the screening process for host families. We were surprised by the number of rules host parents had to abide by, like making sure only Spanish was spoken and that students must be home for dinner, because that's where a lot of conversations take place. Marcella went above and beyond to make Mack's stay the best experience it could possibly be. He was included in family events such as birthdays and holidays. “Why?” I asked. “Because he is *Mi Familia*,” she answered.

Mi familia, indeed.



Mack (in hat) with indigenous school children



Mack's mother Charlene and host mother Marcella

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