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Commentaries

"Menudas Vueltas da el Destino": How Choosing to Live in a Homestay Brought Me Closer to a Culture

—Emily Louick (Editor: Jennifer Lee)

Emily Louick graduated from the University of New Hampshire in 2009 with a bachelor of arts in the dual major of Spanish and theatre and dance.

When I first learned about the International Research Opportunities Program (IROP) at UNH, I was intrigued. This was the fall semester of 2006 and I was a sophomore. The program offered students grants to conduct independent research abroad in a field of their choice, during the summer after their junior year. As a dual Spanish and theatre major, I loved that I could design an individualized course of study combining my two majors as well as my skills and interests in the arts and Spanish language.

Having been greatly influenced by the dance program at UNH, I decided to center my IROP research on one of the most famous aspects of Spanish culture: flamenco dance. I found that my resources to learn about this topic in the United States were very limited, and I was eager to contribute a new art form to the Department of Theatre and Dance. My intention was to come home with an advanced knowledge of the technique and history of flamenco dance in Spain. I spent ten months writing my grant proposal, and I was accepted to the program!

Destiny and Granada

In Spanish, there is a common saying, *Menudas vueltas da el destino*. As a whole, it means "Funny how life goes around"; but translated literally, it means that destiny "gives us small changes or turns"—a phrase that I love. This saying has come to signify many of my experiences abroad.

In my IROP application, I had proposed to live in the Andalusian cities of Granada and Seville. In Granada I would focus on the cultural impact and history of flamenco, and in Seville I would learn the dance technique. I found an intensive six-week program of study at the Cristina Heeren Flamenco Foundation in Seville, where I would spend six to eight hours a day in dance class or history lectures taught by my foreign mentor, Pepa Sanchez.

My initial plan was to live on my own in an apartment or student housing, thinking this would provide more flexibility for me to study and conduct interviews with local flamenco artists. However, my UNH mentors, Jaume Marti Olivella and John Chaston of the Spanish department, encouraged me to pursue homestays. They insisted it would not only be safer but would also enrich my cultural experience in Spain. I agreed, remembering my previous experiences abroad in homestays and the relationships I had cultivated with those families. I wasn't expecting an exact repeat of those experiences though, just a place to live and to get my work done. *Menudas vueltas da el destino*.

Granada, where my summer research began, is a city known for its culturally diverse citizens and the famous Alhambra, a palace dating back to the late 800s. I had been assigned a homestay with Luis and Fernanda Bermudez, a couple with grown children, living in a lovely apartment in the more modern section of the city. They had recently become host parents, and I was to be their first female student.



The author during a flamenco dance class at the Cristina Heeren Flamenco Foundation, summer 2008.



The author with her Granada host parents, Luis and Fernanda Bermudez, winter 2013.

When I arrived at their home in late May of 2008, I was warmly greeted by Luis, who gave me a big hug and exclaimed "*Guapa!*" meaning "Beautiful," a common welcome offered by Spaniards. He took my suitcase and ushered me to the living room, where a beautiful lunch had been prepared by Fernanda. They watched in eager anticipation as I wolfed down *arroz con pollo* (chicken with rice) and soup to start, then strawberries and cream for dessert. As Luis signed the housing contracts I had drafted in English and Spanish, he mumbled "*muy bien, muy bien*" (another of his commonly used phrases) and asserted that as long as I was in his house, I was to eat, study and enjoy myself—everything he felt I "deserved" as a guest in his home. Not having had grandparents, I imagined this is what it would have felt like.

Fifteen days came and went quickly. In Granada I attended flamenco shows, interviewed artists, dancers, and musicians and got adjusted to Spanish life. I spent most of my free time with Luis and Fernanda in their living room watching television and discussing my research, their childhoods in Spain, and the differences between Americans and Spaniards. Luis helped me with my vocabulary by turning on TV game shows in Spanish. By the end of the two weeks, I was able to guess most of the answers before the contestants on the show could.

When it came time to leave, Fernanda told me I was her daughter and that any time I wanted to return, their doors were open. They said they were grateful to have had me stay with them and appreciated my passion for flamenco. They wished me luck in Seville. I thanked them and promised that I would return as soon as I could. In that moment I realized that I had gained much more in Granada than I had ever intended: I had not only completed the beginnings of my research but had obtained a family as well. Had I lived alone, my research and cultural experience would have been vastly different.

Dancing in Seville

When I arrived in Seville, I was met at the train station by my host parents, Macu and Armando, and their two young sons, Juan and Armandito. As we walked to the car, the boys fired questions at me in rapid Spanish. I struggled to keep up but managed to hold my own, thinking that after the next eight weeks my Spanish would have improved even more. From the front seat, I tossed little presents of candy from America back to the boys, and joyously watched their faces light up. I contemplated how they would respond to the jars of peanut butter lining my suitcases.

Macu and Armando lived in a large house in Tomares, a community just outside the main city. It was comforting to be in a quiet area, which would be relaxing to come home to after a day of flamenco lessons. I settled quickly into their beautiful home and extended family. That night, I learned that each of my host parents was the fourth of six siblings, many of whom also lived in Seville. Within days, I was introduced to Macu's parents, siblings, in-laws, nieces and nephews. I also met the woman responsible for my homestay in Seville: Armando's sister Inma, whose best friend was UNH faculty member Carmen Garcia-Rasilla.

I felt lucky. I immediately clicked with everyone and developed a distinct bond with each person. I loved how warm and affectionate they were with each other, the ease with which both sides of their families blended, and how intent they were on including me in everything they did. It didn't take long before I was spending time on my own with each of the siblings, taking beach trips with them to their summer homes, and playing big sister to the sisters' combined seven sons. As a child, I had begged my mom for a little brother. Funny how life goes around!

One Friday afternoon, towards the end of the summer, I was studying in my room. I was exhausted from my intensive dance courses and was having trouble understanding the differences among the four schools of flamenco dance. Pepa was not shy about giving me extra work to do and my plan was to spend the weekend reviewing my assigned reading and beginning work on my final paper due that fall for IROP. I needed the time to begin pulling together all I had learned and experienced in both cities when I heard a knock on my door. It was Macu.

"We're going to the beach in Rota!"

Without turning around, I said "Great! Have fun! I'll see you guys Sunday then."

"No." she replied firmly. "We are going to the beach. You, me, Armando, and the boys."

"Oh, thank you, Macu," I said, "but this is the last weekend before classes end. I have so much work to do. You guys

enjoy."

"Mimi," she said, calling me by the nickname her younger son had given me. "I wasn't asking. You're part of my family now, and I want you to come with us as our family member."

I looked at my pile of books. I also looked at my bathing suit hanging in the bathroom, still drying from the previous day's trip to the family's summer country club.

"I know that in the States there is a lot of focus on studying, and I admire that," Macu continued "but you have to take some time to enjoy life, too— and you're in Spain. Please come to the beach with us. You can bring a book or two if you like."

"OK. OK. I'll go. Thanks, Macu!"

I turned back to my desk. I felt her still in the doorway.

"Emily"

"Yeah?"

"We're leaving right now."

"Right! Right!"

I scooped up my books and swimsuit and hastily packed for the weekend away. I knew Macu was right; I hadn't come to Spain just to study, and I wasn't living with a homestay just to have a safe place to live. I was living there to develop relationships and gain a deeper understanding of the culture where I was living and studying.

Gaining and Keeping Families

That weekend, sitting on a beach on the coast of Spain, I saw the most unbelievable sunset. Standing with my "family," listening to them sing and dance as the sky became dark, I studied the tip of Africa extending far out into the ocean in front of me and realized that my IROP experience had given me far more than just a ten-week study abroad trip. It truly had given me a complete understanding of a new culture and, above all, the thing I hadn't realized I most wanted: two additional, wonderful families, and lifelong personal connections.

Since that summer of 2008, I have maintained regular communication with my host families. I love being able to still include them in my life and to be continually updated about theirs. I also get the chance to practice my Spanish. In 2011, I was able to reciprocate the families' hospitality when Luis and Fernanda's daughter, Mayte, visited New York City with her boyfriend Guillermo. They even spent Thanksgiving with my family.

This past winter, after four and a half years apart, I was able to make good on my promise to return to Spain. I spent two weeks visiting both families in Granada and Seville, as they happily included me in their Christmas and New Year's celebrations and took me to places I still had yet to visit like the Sierra Nevada, Triana, and Lanjarón. The trip was unforgettable! I eased back into my life there as if I had never left and met even more family members.

They remain people whom I love with all my heart and miss daily. Until the next trip, these photos bring them closer to me.

This experience could not have been possible without the support of a great many people. I want to thank Georgeann Murphy, Peter Akerman, and the Hamel Center staff, who spent hours with me editing my proposal; the Board that approved my trip; and Dana Hamel and Margaret Clarke Norman for being my wonderful sponsors. My thanks also go to my mentors and advisors for believing and trusting me with this work: Pepa Sanchez of the



The author with the Ruiz-Lopez family, her hosts in Seville, winter 2013.



The author with Mayte and Guillermo, members of her Granada host family, in Granada, winter 2013.

Cristina Heeren Flamenco Foundation in Seville; and UNH faculty Gay Nardone, John Chaston, and Jaume Marti-Olivella. More thanks to my host families in Spain and to my tough-as-nails dance cohorts and everyone I had the pleasure of meeting while abroad. Last but not least, thank you to my parents, sister and friends, who weathered the six-hour time difference and answered my calls at all hours to give me support, guidance and love.

Author Bio

Alumna **Emily Louick** is currently a freelance producer for television. She is based in New York City and calls Brooklyn her hometown. She has worked with MTV, CBS, Fox-Utilisima, ABC Primetime Casting, and the Cooking Channel, among others. Emily finds her knowledge of Spanish is useful at her work and when looking for work. More importantly, she uses it regularly to communicate with her host families and Spanish-speaking friends.

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