

I have wanted to live and work abroad for as long as I can remember. It's been a dream of mine ever since I was very young. My past studies and travels in Asia and Latin America, as fascinating and stimulating as they were, always left me longing for something deeper, more involved, more substantial. It wasn't enough to go to a foreign country and stay for a short time as a visitor, to be an observer looking in at the "real life" of that place from the outside. I wanted to learn to speak another language, to become completely immersed in the culture and daily life of that place, to form friendships, to get below the surface and understand the subtleties of that society.

I remember thinking and feeling years ago that if there was one thing that I needed in my life to make me more whole and fulfilled as a person, it would be to spend time living in another country - perhaps a counter-reaction to the absolute stability and homogeneity of my upbringing. Or maybe I can chalk it up to astrology - I was born under the sign of Sagittarius, the Archer, the adventurer, who shoots his arrows out into space and chases after them wherever they may fall. Regardless of the reasons, and even if I didn't completely understand why, I've always known that I needed the experience of living daily life in another culture and to let that experience change me. Receiving this grant from the Jessica Jennifer Cohen Foundation has allowed me to make these dreams a reality. Argentina and Latin America have become an integral part of who I am, and without question I am more whole and complete as a result of my time here.

The most tangible benefit of my six-month work contract is the professional growth it has fostered. I've been interested in community planning work in the developing world for a long time, and this grant gave me my first opportunity to take my education, knowledge, and skills and put them to use in a foreign country. The time that I have spent working in Argentina has really helped me to clarify what I want to do in my future work. I have been exposed to the international movement for working toward sustainability at the local level and have realized how much I enjoy this focus and perspective. I've learned that I really have a passion for international development work and have learned a lot about how professionals from the North (or "industrialized" countries") and from the South (or "developing" countries) can collaborate, learn together, support each other, and work together toward mutual goals. I know that having this hands-on experience will open up new professional opportunities for me in the future.

Of course my Spanish has improved immensely during my time here. I'm now completely comfortable having a conversation with anyone in Spanish; I can usually express almost everything I want to say and understand most of what I hear. Sometimes I even dream in Spanish. I've become proficient in a second language and am proud of this accomplishment. Not only will it allow me to maintain my connection to Latin American culture, but it will be a very useful and valuable skill that will open new doors for me in my future work, regardless of whether I am working in the public sector in the United States or doing professional work in Spain or Latin America.

These six months have also been a love affair with Argentina itself. It's a country that readily captivates, and I have fallen completely under its spell. I love so many things about

Argentinian culture: the omnipresent ritual of drinking *yerba mate*, the bitter tea that is prepared in a special type of gourd and shared among friends. The sultry and melancholy energy of the Tango, the world's most passionate dance, which I have been studying and practicing during my time here. The custom of greeting friends, acquaintances and even strangers with a kiss on the cheek. Each of these cultural practices has become a part of me that I will take back home with me and will remember and treasure always.

I've also come to embrace the less endearing aspects of Argentine culture, its many inefficiencies and flaws, which range from amusing to downright infuriating (depending on how much sleep I had the night before). My demanding and impatient North American nature has been broken, calmed, and softened. Living in a country like Argentina you can't get upset about people arriving half an hour late for meetings, information not being accurate or not available, events not starting on time, not having variety and options and choices. Inevitably at times the corner store won't have change when you go to buy milk in the morning, you'll sit down in a restaurant and have to wait for ten minutes until someone notices and brings you a menu, your cell phone won't be able to send text messages for two days for no apparent reason. You become very aware of the things that you DO have and you learn to be grateful for them, instead of focusing on what's lacking or not working. You learn to relax and laugh and smile.

I've also been sobered at times by the darker side of life in Argentinian society - the ever-present spectacle of poverty. I was continually distressed by the number of people who scratch out a meager living working the city buses and subways selling an imaginative array of bizarre merchandise, or juggling balls on the edges of street intersections hoping for tips from drivers stopped at red lights. I was particularly troubled one day by a little girl who approached me on the subway, extended her tiny hand to shake mine, and implored me to buy a greeting card. She couldn't have been more than four years old, and already trained like a little caged monkey, exploited by her parents for the sake of generating desperately needed income for the family. I've been affected very deeply and personally by the stories of how the country's economic hardships have impacted some of my Argentinian friends, and I've seen the long and hard hours they have to work to make ends meet. Observing and reflecting on these harsh realities has made me think a lot about the way I live, what I have, what I want, and what is really important to me. Although of course I can't change these problems overnight and I don't have any brilliant answers, I am glad to say that my experiences of living and working in Argentina have at least given me some insight as to how to begin trying to improve social and economic conditions and support others in their quest for a better quality of life.

But I think that the most valuable outcomes of my time in Argentina are much more subtle and powerful. One of the most memorable and profound moments happened at the most unlikely of times and under the most unlikely of circumstances. My supervisor Horacio and I had driven early one morning to the city of Avellaneda, an hour away from our office in La Plata. Avellaneda is one of two municipalities in Argentina that has been involved in local planning to combat the problem of climate change with support and funding from international organizations. It had taken us several weeks and repeated phone calls to set up a meeting with the woman from the local government who was in charge of the project, and for me it was a very important meeting that would hopefully provide me with useful and valuable information. When we arrived for our appointment with her, she was out of the office. No reason, no explanation, no apology. Just out of the office. We'd have to call back to reschedule the meeting.

So we turned around to drive back to La Plata, both of us feeling discouraged and frustrated. I found myself wondering, "What's the point? Why even try, why waste my time? Why should I care if no one else does?" After sitting for a while in the car in silence, watching the run-down slums of outer Buenos Aires whiz by, I turned to Horacio and asked him, "What do you think is the most important thing in life?" He smiled and answered, "Ser feliz." To be happy. I smiled back at him, because it was exactly what I had been thinking too. "And are you happy?" I asked him. "Sí," he responded, nodding.

I turned back to the window, thinking about my own life: my roots, my family, my relationships, my education, my work, my country. Everything I had, everything I still wanted. My dreams, my struggles, my professional ambitions, my fears and insecurities. I had always wanted to dedicate my life to making the world a better place, and now that passion had taken me to the other side of the world, to an unfamiliar place where sometimes things made no sense. But in that moment it hit me with the force of an epiphany: on one level, the most important thing that any of us can do to make the world better is simply to learn to be happy.

More than they could ever realize, my colleagues, friends, and neighbors in Argentina, have played a very important role in teaching me about tranquility, simplicity, optimism, peace, and happiness - which I strongly believe are the most important qualities that any person can strive for in the quest to bring more sustainability and justice to this world. The experience of everyday life in Argentina became a metaphor and lesson to me - a gentle reminder to cultivate happiness in every moment, even though the external circumstances in the world may be difficult or less than ideal. Horacio, with his tireless tenacity, positive attitude, and professionalism, has been an incredible inspiration and role model, not only in terms of work but also in terms of life in general. My other colleagues, friends, and neighbors often reminded me of the importance of family ties and of community in the broader sense that are so often missing in North American culture. Living in Argentina has helped me to connect with and be nourished by the simplicity of everyday life, and the joy and fulfillment that can be found in each moment.

In closing, I am honored to be part of the group of inspiring and talented young professionals who have received grants from JJCF and proud to have had the opportunity to carry out this work in Jessica's name. I would like to extend my sincere gratitude to the founders, staff, and donors of the Jessica Jennifer Cohen Foundation for this tremendous gift.

Please see attached photographs below

Community Workshop Photographs







Farewell Lunch Photographs





My Coworkers At Fundacion Biosfera



Workshop Poster

The poster features a central graphic with a grid pattern on the ground and a stylized blue figure holding a magnifying glass. Above the grid are six rounded rectangular panels showing: a person recycling, a solar panel, a bicycle lane, a traffic jam, a smokestack emitting smoke, and a landfill. The text below the graphic provides details about the workshop.

Taller educativo y participativo
Cambio Climático
y Nuestra Ciudad:
en Busca de Respuestas

FUNDACION BIOSFERA
Organizado por Fundación Biosfera
Sábado 20 de mayo, de 14:00 hs a 19:00 hs
Centro Cultural Islas Malvinas, Av. 19 y 51
Entrada libre y gratuita
Información e inscripción a los
teléfonos 457-3477 y 457-0481

Auspiciado por la Dirección de Uso Eficiente de la Energía y Medio Ambiente de la Dirección Provincial de Energía,
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