

Beyond

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Beyond My Expectations

Chelsea Fife

Boarding the plane to Florence, I was excited yet nervous thinking of what the next four months had in store. I had never traveled to Europe before, but I had expectations that my semester would consist of learning about Italian culture as well as meeting new students at the International Studies Institute program. What I did not imagine while walking through the airport with my three bags and my passport in-hand was that I was about to embark on an adventure that would impact my life for years to come.

While I was preparing for a semester abroad and choosing my classes, one course caught my eye. I have always had a passion for assisting others, and I wanted to continue working with people with disabilities while I was in Italy. ISI Florence offered a course called *Cultural Engagement Practicum: Critical Disabilities Studies*. I learned from the professors at ISI Florence that this course would involve traveling twenty minutes by train to a restaurant in Pontassieve, which is a town outside of Florence. It was my responsibility to work with the staff members with disabilities who were hired by the restaurant. The professors at ISI Florence also informed me that only one person at the restaurant could speak a minimal amount of English. I knew that this opportunity was going to be challenging, but I also knew that I would learn valuable lessons and information that could benefit me in graduate school and in my future career as an Occupational Therapist.

On the first day, when I arrived at the restaurant, the staff hugged me and greeted me at the door. I only knew how to introduce myself in Italian and ask the staff their names. It was difficult to understand everything that they were saying because my Italian vocabulary was limited. We used hand gestures and small phrases in Italian to communicate. After a couple of weeks, my professor had an idea that I should teach English to the staff members at the restaurant because the staff was interested in the language and frequently asked me how to pronounce words in English.

I knew that teaching the staff English would also help me improve my Italian. I decided to choose topics to teach the staff that were beneficial to their work setting. The topics ranged from fruits and vegetables to objects in the restaurant. The staff was always excited at the end of their shifts for the English lesson. During the workday they would ask me what the topic was for that day and then request topics for the following week. Every word that the staff learned in English, I was taught in Italian by the staff members as well. When I left the restaurant on my last day, I cried while saying goodbye to everyone. As I walked back to the train station to board the train back to Florence for the last time, I thought about how much time I spent with the staff and how much we all learned from each other.

While reflecting on my time spent in Florence and traveling to nine other countries on the weekends, I realized that all of my expectations had been surpassed. The CEP 201 course alone exceeded my outlook for being abroad. I was able to learn so much from the staff members at the restaurant who had disabilities. Not only did I learn how to work with the staff, but I also adjusted to working in a new culture. I was able to use the Italian that I learned throughout the rest of my time abroad. When my friends and I went out for meals, I was able to ask questions and understand the waiters and waitresses in Italian. This course taught me not only about Italian culture, but it also taught me lifelong lessons to which I can always refer. This experience taught me that in my future as an Occupational Therapist I might not always be able to communicate with my patients, so I will need to use similar techniques such as gestures and short phrases that my patients can understand.

When I returned home from studying in Florence, my friends and family asked me about my favorite moment from abroad. As I began to recap the past semester, I could not pick one favorite part from my four months of adventures. I realized that everything I had experienced changed me into a better person. I discussed this idea of living in a new culture and finding my own way in many of my graduate school essays and interviews. Graduate school faculties found my time abroad unique because not only did I adjust to a new culture and classes in another

country, but I also spent time doing something I loved – helping people with disabilities. They also pointed out that when I talked about my time abroad they could see how meaningful it was to me.

I am now one semester into graduate school and I can relate almost everything that I am learning in school to my time abroad. It has been two years since I arrived in Florence, but I constantly think about my experiences and how I can still learn more from them. As the next cohort of students begin to leave for a semester in Florence, many of them ask me for advice about their next four months. I have trouble being able to sum up everything about my experiences in a text message or email. The most important piece of advice that I can give someone is to step outside of their boundaries and challenge themselves. If I had not stepped outside my comfort zone and participated in the CEP 201 course and work in Pontassieve, I would not be the person I am today. I advise people studying abroad in Florence to live in the moment and be grateful for every opportunity. Florence changed my perspective on life, and the experience was beyond my expectations.