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Crossing Borders Writing Contest

### Crossing cultures

The week before leaving for my study abroad program in Viña Del Mar, Chile was a restless one. I layed in my bed surfing the web for photos, discussion forums, and news articles which I hoped would provide me with some insight into this adventure I'd soon embark on. But no amount of information I gathered would fully prepare me for what I would encounter. Undoubtedly, I can now say that culture is an experience. It requires a spirit of open-mindedness, flexibility, and curiosity.

2019 marked my first time ever journeying outside the United States. During the Summer, I participated in a Habitat for Humanity build in El Salvador, and immediately after, I began preparations for my fall term abroad.

This experience truly opened my eyes to the cultural egocentrism which is so intricately woven into the fabric of society. Although implicit, it is easy to operate with the assumption that our culture and ways of doing things are inherently better. But a long term stay in any other country will challenge that ideology. Undoubtedly, no travel experience is perfect. In fact, one could compare the initial range of emotions to a "honeymoon phase". Sitting on the airplane, having no idea what to expect, we daydream of the limitless possibilities and adventures to come, the beautiful landscape, and the people we will meet. Upon arriving, you may even find that such high expectations are met. Then after a while, discomfort sets in. When I finally adjusted to this lovely, touristic, ocean-side city of Chile, I began to notice the things I missed about

home. I missed grits, macaroni and cheese, fried chicken, and all of my other southern soul food favorites. I became annoyed at the lack of options in the supermarket, and the clothes available in the mall, among other things. During this period, I found myself focusing on the things I appreciated about life in America, trying to understand how someone could possibly live any other way. But then I remembered the advice I had received during my summer program. "Keep an open mind". This proved to be of the utmost importance throughout my experience. I began to replace "this is better" with, "this is different". This mentality is what allowed me to truly benefit from this journey.

Talking with my Chilean friends, I saw that they too misunderstood some of the different perspectives and behaviors of American people. During Fiesta De Las Patrias, a week-long celebration which can be likened to Independence Day in America, I took a trip to the southernmost region of South America, Patagonia. This icy wonderland features snow capped mountains, glaciers, blueish-green lagoons, and is teeming with wildlife such as the Guanaco. My new friends were intrigued by the long trek I had made from home. "Eres chica. ¡Que valiente!", many people remarked. I then began to understand the distinction between our individualistic culture and their collectivist one. Although I consider myself an adult, they could not wrap their minds around the fact that a 19 year old girl would journey so far from home. And although the family oriented nature of Chilean culture was not always easy to grapple with, I appreciated it. While most youths in America scramble to leave the nest by 18, a 30 year old graduate student in Chile might remain in the comfort of home until marriage. My level of independence, while atypical at home, would be unheard of and maybe even offensive

for some of my new Chilean friends. I learned that good or bad is relative. No “right way” really exists. There is only “different”.

My international experience has rewarded me with a well rounded perspective. I have grown personally in a number of ways. I learned to push my boundaries. The discomfort and inconvenience that I experienced at times helped me to become more dedicated to solution seeking. I remember moments of frustration that called for adjustment. Going to the supermarket to find hair products presented a dilemma. As people of African heritage have only recently begun to reside in Chile the marketplace has yet to adapt. I was unable to find the hygiene and grooming necessities which I easily access at home. But I eventually learned to make them myself with natural ingredients. Also, due to a lack of hair stylists which specialize in services for my hair texture, I also was forced to learn protective hairstyles such as braids and locs. It's safe to say that I wouldn't have become so self sufficient if it were not for this time away from home.

Through all of these experiences, I have come to realize that moments of discomfort can allow us to grow in aspects we'd never imagined. I now understand the importance of not limiting myself in any capacity. Traveling so far has made me push my limits, allowing me to develop into a more gracious, self-sufficient, and well-informed individual.