

Sara Loewel
Santa Clara University '15
Syracuse University- Florence Program '13
2013 Scholarship Recipient

To the County of Santa Clara/ Province of Florence, Italy Sister County Commission:

GRAZIE MILLE! I cannot even express how grateful I am for your help with my Fall 2013 study abroad semester in Florence. I have many people to thank for giving me this opportunity to study abroad, but this scholarship allowed me to experience Florence and all of Italy to its fullest and immerse myself in the Italian culture. I am so thankful.

I always knew I wanted to study abroad in Italy because of my encouraging Italian family yearning for me to learn about our family roots. Because of this, I decided to minor in Italian my freshman year to prepare for my semester abroad, and I can say two years of Italian classes were definitely an advantage the minute I stepped off of the plane in Florence. Florence is an urban, yet ancient city that never left me feeling overwhelmed. I am not a "city girl," and Florence was the perfect sized city filled with tons of art history and hospitable people.

I studied abroad through the Syracuse University Florence program, and it was the best choice for me. Surprisingly it was great being in a program where there were only four of us from Santa Clara because we met kids from schools all over the country. I even made friends with international students around the world. Syracuse University also puts students in a homestay. The homestay is one of the reasons why I picked this particular program. I was lucky to be placed with the most amazing Florentine family, the Cerbai's, who showed me extraordinary hospitality and love throughout my 4 months abroad. My host parents, Angela and Giovanni, spoke very little English, and I had a 30-year-old host sister, Gabriella, who could translate for us when we were lost in translation. My roommate in the homestay was another SCU student who had barely taken any Italian. Our homestay family dynamic helped my Italian conversation become fluent quickly. Every night at dinner we had a no English policy! Ironically, my host mom and my actual mom had the same name, Angela, and that made my stay even more "home-y." Angela's food was amazing the entire time, and she always wanted to give us recipes so we could teach our families back at home. Giovanni entertained us with his baritone singing voice and his choral performances. The Cerbai's were situated in the most convenient spot only 15 minutes walking distance from school. I will always remember our long and comical dinners as we attempted to explain American jokes and teach our family American songs.

While school was still rigorous, I spent a lot of time with my classes going off campus into downtown Florence. Some days would be spent going to an Italian market and buying local foods for my Italian class. We would have to speak in Italian to order and pay for what we wanted, but we also got to learn about food specific to Tuscany. My classical mythology class frequented many museums around Florence weekly including the Archeology Museum and the Uffizi. My photography class went to Boboli Gardens, Forte Belvedere, and many open air

markets to shoot pictures. As a Political Science major, my favorite class was my Italian Politics course: the past present and future of Italy. My choice of taking classes solely involving Italy made my readings and lectures that much more engaging in class. One time, we had a lecture at a historical café in the center, and we debated Italy's political system over a cappuccino. Also, Syracuse University had an amazing program called, "Spazio Conversazione," or free conversation. Because my confidence level of speaking Italian at Santa Clara was low, I knew I had to attend these weekly "free conversation" meetings. We would get paired up with an Italian partner and be forced to speak in Italian and then in English for two hours. These meetings were the highlight of my experience. I waited for Tuesdays to come around because I could speak with students my age about anything I wanted and be more comfortable speaking Italian. I met many local Italian friends this way. We started to also meet on other days besides Tuesdays. I would get lunch with them or even dinner, and sometimes we would see Italian films. To me, these friendships were the true immersion experience, and I loved being able to walk around Florence feeling like a native rather than a tourist.

Overall, after four months, my Italian improved greatly and that was a huge goal of mine. Florence became a second home to me. I prided myself in knowing most of the streets by heart, many local eateries and many points of interest by the end of my trip. I was so lucky to be taken care of by the Cerbai family who did everything they could to make my stay comfortable and challenge me everyday to push myself further in my Italian. I already miss Florence so much, and I am slowly adjusting to life back in the United States.

Thank you again to the County of Santa Clara Italy Sister County Commission for this scholarship and for giving me the opportunity to learn more about myself and about Italy. I feel so proud to be Italian. Living in Florence was a life changing experience, and I'm so excited to go back one day.

Sara Loewel
Santa Clara University '15