

I announce to you with great pleasure that I have struggled, cried, and become distraught. My life in Italy can only be described as a life on fast-forward-- everyday feels like a week smashed into one. I've never experienced such a wonderful struggle and it is an understatement when I say I will never be the same again. **Thanks to the County of Santa Clara, CA USA/Province of Florence, Italy Sister County Commission I have been able to take full advantage of my stay here in Italy.** With this extra money I was able to find the perfect apartment with Italians, visit the overwhelming amount of museums, and explore other cities in Italy.

When I arrived in Italy I was determined to live with Italians. Florence is a pretty expensive city, especially if you want to live within walking distance of anything. Thanks to the extra money from my scholarship I didn't have to worry about living far outside of the city center where it would be difficult to get to school or partake in the many city events. After the nine months of living in that apartment I couldn't be more grateful for being able to afford it. Living in this apartment I've had the most genuine experiences of Italian student life. I found a charming home with two Italian sisters and throughout the nine months I met the sisters' circle of friends. They were all students of Florence University with strong personalities dominated by a mix of Italian family values and freethinking that was a product of being young in a country of political turmoil. To say the least, I was shy at first. It is one thing to speak Italian one on one, but to be in the middle of group of young people speaking comfortably with one another is a whole other animal. Regardless of my lack of communication skills, they always made me feel comfortable whether it was at my own house or at theirs.

Beyond my wonderful apartment, the County of Santa Clara, CA USA/Province of Florence, Italy Sister County Commission has allowed me to explore the wonderful cultural events of Florence. Obviously, The Uffizzi Gallery can never be visited too often. With the extra funds I've received I was able to visit The Uffizzi several times. Getting to know the works Botticelli, Raphael, and many others first hand has been tremendously inspiring and truly a once in a life time opportunity. With visits to the Medici Palace, the Pitti Palace, and the many gorgeous churches, like Santa Croce and Santa Maria Novella, I've gained more insight into the history of the Renaissance than I ever could have with just a history book. When I was in front of Santa Croce or Santa Maria Novella I was awestruck every time. Every time I enter these churches I feel the history of them. I can walk on the same ground as Michelangelo did when he was just an apprentice. I can sit in same pews as the people who were enchanted by Savonarola's sermons. My imagination never had to take me very far in order to go back hundreds of years from now.

Now that I am back home, Italy seems like a far away magical dream but my personal experiences and growth have remained with me and I know I can never look at the world the same way again. **I am grateful beyond words for this once in a lifetime opportunity and urge every student to take advantage of the resources available to them, like the County of Santa Clara, CA USA/Province of Florence, Italy Sister County Commission**, in order to expand their college education in a truly unique way.