

FROM: 2008 Scholarship recipient Kelly Ward
Santa Clara University student

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Dear Santa Clara County,

I would like to take this opportunity to share with you my experience studying abroad in Florence, Italy this last semester. When I left home last September, I was both excited and scared. I had no idea what to expect, but I knew that this would be an unforgettable experience. Arriving in Florence and becoming acclimated to the busy culture and city was extremely overwhelming. I had never lived in a big city anywhere, and now my first big city experience was in a foreign country. To put it simply, I was extremely out of my comfort zone.

However, after meeting my host family and orienting myself to the wonders of Florence, my fears subsided. My host parents, Anna and Niccolo Ridolfi, truly made my experience priceless. A younger couple without kids, Anna and Niccolo were extremely welcoming and interested in my experience abroad. Though my classes took me to visit the Uffizzi and to see the David, Anna and Niccolo were my real teachers. From nightly dinner conversations to weekend trips to photography exhibits, my host parents were my window into the Italian culture. Every night my roommate and I would return home to see Anna preparing dinner in the kitchen, while Niccolo listened to a new CD or read a book on history. Dinner conversations consisted of countless questions about America from Niccolo and numerous questions about Italian culture from my roommate and me. Discussions comparing and contrasting the two cultures dominated our dinner talk. Anna always asked us about our day and what we had learned in Italian class. Despite our broken Italian, Anna would always encourage us to use the new phrase and grammatical tenses we had learned. I strongly believe it was because of her patience and confidence in me that enabled me to grasp the Italian language. I learned how to speak and converse in Italian through my host parents, not through my Italian class. This ability to speak the language accurately provided me with the opportunity to immerse myself in the community and culture of Florence.

During the months I spent living in Florence, I learned an immense amount about the Renaissance through experience. My classes took me into the city, showing me rather than telling me about the history of the city. I would constantly have to pinch myself anytime I would walk by the Duomo or across the Ponte Vecchio. I always told myself how lucky I was to have the opportunity to become part of this rich culture.

Aside from living and experiencing Florence, my abroad experience provided me with the opportunity to travel to other Italian cities and other countries. My school courses often had field trips to local towns like Assisi and Ravenna, as well as larger cities like Rome and Venice. On these trips, I visited museums and monuments with a professor therefore providing me with knowledge I will always keep. In addition to trips around Italy, I was able to take a few trips to nearby countries such as Austria, Switzerland and Spain. These experiences opened my eyes to other cultures different from my own, and from the Italian culture to which I felt I belonged.

My experience abroad was extraordinary and is something I know I will always cherish. Later in life I hope to go back and visit, but I know that I will never again have the opportunity to live and learn in Florence, Italy. I want to thank the Santa Clara County for their assistance in my experience abroad. I truly appreciate the help that you provided me, therefore making my time abroad that much more memorable.

Thank you!

Sincerely,
Kelly Ward
Santa Clara University