

Welcome to **Perspectives from Latin America**, a newsletter by university students for elementary, middle, and high school students. Through this newsletter we hope that you gain new insights about the countries of Latin America from the experiences of those who have lived or traveled there.

Perspectives features articles written by University of Notre Dame students who are from Latin America or have studied, interned, or traveled to the region. Their articles cover unique experiences they have had in Latin America and inform you about the culture, people, and politics of the region. Since the authors are students at Notre Dame, **they are available to visit your classrooms**. If you are interested in any particular article and would like to meet the author, let us know and we will help arrange that meeting.

Perspectives also lists upcoming local events related to Latin America. Once you begin reading and learning about Latin America, we hope you will want to participate in as many activities related to the region as possible.

Enjoy the articles and we look forward to seeing you at our events!

The Malfunctioning Drill

by Mikey Moses, Philosophy major

In Mexico, the pace of daily life moves much more slowly than in the United States. And it was driving me crazy. I was in my seventh week at the medical clinic. After what had been an incredibly slow process of acquisition and assembly, I was ready to begin installing the white picket fence that had occupied the majority of my time in Mexico. All I needed to do was anchor the fence into the walls whose length it would span. Standing before the wall of stuccoed concrete block, I squeezed the trigger of the large yellow drill that I held in my hands, eagerly anticipating its mechanical *whir*. And then I squeezed it again. And again. No sound issued forth. In fact, the drill head wasn't even rotating. The drill was, by all appearances, dead. I held the power tool up, close to my face, and stared at it disapprovingly.

Maybe, I thought, it'll start working if I want it badly enough. After a few moments of intense glaring had left me cross-eyed, I decided to squeeze the trigger again. Surely the drill would start working now. But yet again, my grasping finger was greeted with stony silence. I tried poking the tip of the drill against the wall, hoping that perhaps some tactile contact would inspire it to fulfill its function. A few seconds later, when I saw that I had picked up my hammer and was seriously considering beating the

drill into the wall, I elected to take some deep breaths and consider the situation before I did anything rash.

Obtaining construction materials in Oaxaca (wah-HA-ka) is a tricky business. My shoe-string budget made things even more difficult. It had taken me a week to obtain and acquire all the tools and wood that I'd needed to even begin constructing my fence. Attaining painting materials and metal brackets had taken additional time. The



Mikey finishes up painting before using the drill.

last step was the drill. Two days spent scouring Oaxaca resulted in the obtainment of a drill powerful enough to drive into concrete. I was, after seven long weeks of work, ready to finish the fence. But now the most important tool in my possession wasn't working. The drill, like my hope of ever completing my

project, was broken.

It was then, as I tried to refrain from throwing the drill across the courtyard, that I felt a hand on my shoulder. I looked up to find a rotund Mexican man, the clinic's security guard, standing next to me. "Qué haces, Mikey?" he asked me ("What are you doing?"). I explained to him that I was taking some deep breaths. The drill, I told him, my most important tool, was not working. And because the drill wasn't working, I was not going to be able to finish the fence. Ever.

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Bailando el Tango

Kelly Mannion, Political Science major



Kelly and Ariel tango!

I'll admit this much: I am not a very good dancer. I have a terrible sense of rhythm, a poor system of coordination, and a shallow knowledge of dancing forms. Sure, when the music hits just right I can bust out some moves like any other, but I do not promise a pretty sight. My eleven-week experience in Argentina this past summer, however,

truly exposed me to a higher form of dance and pushed me to experiment with my own rhythmic skills. The Argentine tango – a musical genre and its associated dance - is the cultural pride and joy of the city of Buenos Aires. It is a partner (male/female) dance, infusing structured steps and complementary movements, to tell a tale of lust and loss, of desire, revenge, and loneliness.

During my first two weeks in Buenos Aires, I frequently met with my language instructor, Ariel, who was himself a learned tango dancer. He told me of the history and legacy of the tango in the great Argentine city, of how it evolved as an art form from the poor, outskirt districts of Buenos Aires to the great stages of local city theaters. Although the tango is now practiced outside the impoverished streets where it originated, the meaning and beauty of the dance remains the same. The tango is so much more than routine, synchronized steps, performed in time with a musical beat. It is a cultural keystone – a visual representation of the sensuality, romance, openness, and pride that is so associated with the Argentine people and nation.

The day before I left the city of Buenos Aires to begin my internship in La Plata, Argentina, I went with Ariel and a few of his friends to a local *milonga*, a type of nightclub in which the tango is featured as the primary music and dance. There, a wide array of people enjoyed the general atmosphere, ordering food and drink, dancing to favorite songs, socializing with friends and strangers. At the time, it had seemed weird to me that such a diverse group of people, ranging from extremely young and quite old, came

together to partake in such a festivity. And yet, as I came to learn through my general South American experience, the Argentine people are very sociable, outgoing, and welcoming persons. In fact, it was not rare at all for most Argentines, whether young or old, to spend an entire night socializing with friends until the wee hours of the morning. Thus, on this particular night, it should have come as no surprise to me when, at 3 AM, the tango orchestra finally showed up to the *milonga* to start the live show. I watched as professional tango dancers took to the floor, twisting, stepping, and dipping flawlessly. As the rest of the crowd joined in on the fun, Ariel took my hand and led me to the floor to practice my own moves. Needless to say, I was not the most coordinated or fluid of dancers, but with my partner's guidance and support, I was able to survive without extreme public humiliation!

Overall, throughout my Argentina experience, learning and dancing the tango became a central part of achieving my immersion goal. My tango adventures allowed me to take part in a distinct cultural tradition and to share in the memories of the family members and friends I came to know and to love throughout my eleven weeks. Although I still wouldn't claim myself to be a terrific dancer, give me some tango beats and a smooth partner, and I'll be sure to showcase a few moves of the Argentine tango.



Street vendor in Buenos Aires

Tribute to My Washing Machine

by Bridget Mullins, Vocal Performance & Peace Studies major

After only washing a few items of clothing, I knew it was going to be a long morning. Arms aching, knuckles red, and sweat dripping down my forehead, I paused to take a break. It was my first week as a volunteer at COAR (Comunidad Oscar Arnulfo Romero) in Zaragoza, El Salvador, and my first experience washing clothes in the *pila*.

A *pila* is a big stone basin filled with cold water and partly covered by flat stone surfaces which rest on top of the basin. The flat surfaces serve as a sink, washing machine and dishwasher all in one! Practically every family in El Salvador has a *pila*. Few families are privileged enough to have access to water all of the time (if at all!) so it is important for them to keep the *pila* filled with water to prepare food and complete other daily tasks. There are always plastic buckets sitting around which are used to wash hands, faces, clothes, and dishes.

I'm proud to admit that after my first tiring experience washing clothes in the *pila*, I quickly improved my skills and gradually learned the tricks of *pila* washing. First you soak your clothes in soapy water for a few hours. Once you are ready to actually begin washing the clothes you work through one article of clothing at a time lying each item down on the flat sink. Then you take a bar soap, soap up the clothing, scrub it in the *pila*, rinse, scrub, rinse, rinse and rinse again until the water runs clear. When all the soap appears to be gone, you role up the item of clothing and ring it dry as much as possible before hanging it on the clothesline. One of the hardest parts for me was ringing the clothes out—especially larger items such as jeans, towels and sheets.

You can imagine how tiring this process can get after washing several clothing items. This is where I made my mistake the first time—waiting until the last minute to do a large load of laundry! I soon learned through experience and observation that it's important to wash a few items a day. Everyone wakes up early to get a start on washing and to make sure that their clothes have enough time to dry before the end of the day. At COAR, children as little

as six or seven begin washing their own clothes in the *pila*. These children and the house moms certainly taught me a lot; not only about the tricks of washing, such as hanging your clothes inside-out so they don't fade in the sun or not putting white clothing out in the rain so they don't turn yellow, but lessons that reached far deeper such as responsibility and humility.

Today as I consider how easy my life is in comparison, it's still hard not to forget those lessons learned and complain when my life takes an uncomfortable turn. But I try everyday to remember how fortunate I am and how much I take for granted. Now when I do



Bridget washes dishes at the *pila* while laundry hangs to dry overhead.

a load of laundry I don't complain about the time it takes to fold the clothing when it's done or what a pain it is to bring my clothes back up to my room; I think about how lucky I am to be able to press one button and have clean clothes for the next week!

The Drill . . . continued from page 1

He began to laugh. Given that I didn't find the situation to be at all amusing, I asked him what was so funny. Unable to speak because he was laughing so hard, he bent down and picked up a power cord from the floor. Then he pointed at the drill. Its power cord was dangling impotently in the air. I had forgotten to plug it in.

The fence remained uninstalled at the end of the day. The security guard and I spent the next hour laughing and reenacting my antics with the drill for amused patients. We gathered quite a crowd. As I left the clinic that day, I was smiling. Projects in Mexico take a long time for a reason, I think. Maybe some things, like laughter, are more important than efficiency. Maybe, in some situations, having a good time is just as important as meeting a deadline. And maybe, just maybe, electric drills need to be plugged in if you want them to work, no matter where you are.

A Living Ghost

by Kerry McGuire, PreProfessional Studies major

Thanks to my Irish heritage, I am used to being made fun of for my fair, pale skin that almost always refuses to change color, even in the summer. My friends in the US often joke about my “ghostly appearance,” especially in the winter when we have not seen the sun for a few months.

Even so, I did not think I would stick out too much in Mexico. I was going to live in a city, and I had lived in Spain for an entire year without everyone realizing I was an American from 100 yards away. This was before I knew that I was going to be working in the mountains in rural indigenous villages, where a majority of the residents do not speak Spanish. The location and resistance to the Spanish conquest allowed the members of these communities to retain their native languages, dress and way of life. The members of this community were darker than an average city-dwelling Mexican, and access to their villages and towns was restricted to winding dirt mountain roads.

My very first visit to a community was four hours from the city I lived in. The village center consisted of a school and a few other buildings, many of which did not have running water. I was walking through this town center with a Mexican coworker of mine when we were approached by a woman and her mischievous-looking son. He quickly passed his mother and my coworker and

approached me with his hand behind his back. He then proceeded to lob a rock at me, and, to his surprise, it did not pass through me as it would a ghost, but instead bounced off. He ran off to gather some of his friends who followed me around for the rest of the afternoon but never came within three feet of the ghost.

Children’s curiosity at my strange appearance did not end after that first visit. It was not uncommon for a small group to follow me as we worked in the villages, or for a young girl to come poke my side. Of all the cultural differences I was prepared to encounter, being thought of as some sort of ghost or alien was not among them. It was always fun to enter a village and see how the children would react. Some were frightened, others were curious but stayed far from me, while others came up and spoke to me with lots of confidence, asking me questions about myself and my home. I would



A brave child approaches Kerry—the living ghost.

always explain to them that people in the US all look very different from one another, and that is why they would meet a Chinese-looking volunteer one month and a very different Irish-looking one the next. I’m not sure they always understood what I was talking about, but at the very least, I gave them a small experience of the multiculturalism Americans experience everyday, and they taught me how truly different life can be in another country. Even in a country that is not far away on another continent, but one that is our very own neighbor.

Latin America Events

Fall 2008

- 10/30** Day of the Dead Celebration - *Día de los Muertos*. Featured Artists: Chavez Weavers. Food and live music. 7:00 pm, Snite Museum of Art, University of Notre Dame.
- 11/10** **Teacher Discussion Group.** Speaker: Fr. Daniel Groody, CSC, Dept. of Theology will speak on the topic of **Immigration**. Dinner will be provided. **4:15 pm, Room C103, Hesburgh Center for International Studies**
- 11/20** **Roundtable:** “The Future of Democracy in Central America,” **4:15 pm, Eck Center, Auditorium**

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visit <http://kellogg.nd.edu/events/calendar/index.shtml>