

When I was 14, my parents took my brother and me out of school to travel to South America for nine months to expose us to the world outside our small town in Florida. The first five months I spent learning Spanish and attending a public Ecuadorian high school. The next four months we traveled around Ecuador and Peru, to see, taste, and touch colorful cultures and histories I had never before fathomed. Inundated with a completely new language, food, customs, and reality, every day was a new adventure and learning experience. During my time at the public high school, Colegio Benigno Malo, my classmates became my friends as we studied philosophy in school and played pool after class. Learning about history from an Ecuadorian perspective made me realize that reality was not as black and white (or US-centric) as I had been led to believe. Most importantly, I learned the value of communication and challenging your knowledge of the world by working to understand the views of others.

While I counted myself as incredibly lucky to experience such a rich and beautiful culture, I also sometimes found myself angered and confused by parts. From a short stay with an Ecuadorian host family to my normal experiences as a young woman within the culture at large, the pervasiveness of machismo angered me greatly. At the same time, the realities of large wealth disparities, which I had previously ignored and remained ignorant to at home, could not be easily dismissed. With the sprawling shantytowns surrounding Peru's capital only a few minutes' walk from lavish building in the city's center, I found myself keenly aware of gaping class disparities and other seemingly perpetual inequalities. Feeling overwhelmed and powerless to change things, it took a long time for me to comprehend many of my experiences even after I had returned home. Grappling with my confusion and the difficulty of settling back into life as it had been before, one thing became clear: the more I learned about the world and how it came to

be the way it is, the more I would understand and the better equipped I would be to try to tackle the vast injustices to which my eyes had been opened.

At Brandeis, I have taken this desire and run with it. Studying French, Chinese and Spanish, I have continued learning about other cultures and examining the world from different perspectives. Wanting to learn more about the inequalities and systems of oppression that mar societies across the globe, I decided to expand a Brandeis minor into my main area of study with an independent interdisciplinary major in Social Justice and Social Policy. With classes in philosophy, anthropology, psychology, history, gender studies, and sociology, I have been able to connect the disciplines to gain a much more detailed, multi-faceted understanding of inequalities. Integrating my learning in all my classes, I am working to better understanding why the world has the problems it does, how it came to be this way, what people are doing to fix it, and how this knowledge can be used to find innovative improvements and solutions.

This past summer, I wanted to take this learning and test it in the real world, exploring the connection between policy and the actual work being done to create change. To this end, I did outreach at the Massachusetts Commission Against Discrimination (MCAD), contacting organizations serving often disenfranchised populations (such as new immigrants, homeless families, and LGBT groups) to set up, and later conduct presentations. These presentations, about half of which were in Spanish to different Latino groups, worked to empower people by informing them about discrimination law and their civil rights. Talking to people during and after the presentations, I heard their stories and became more aware of how pervasive problems of discrimination are in our supposedly just society. Beyond my presentations, I also observed all parts of structure put in place at the MCAD to protect people from discrimination. Sitting in on complaint intake, mediations sessions, and public hearings, I saw the government policies and

legal system at work with real people pursuing, and often achieving, justice after unfair treatment. At the same time, however, my outreach work brought to my attention the system's weaknesses and failures with the undeniable fact that discrimination and oppression still shape the lives of so many people. In the end, while I appreciate the integral role the MCAD plays in fighting inequality and enforcing people's rights, I was left with the desire to learn more about other ways of attacking these problems at their roots. Working with the Centro de Estudios para la Paz (CEPPA) this coming summer, I plan to do just that.

As an organization, CEPPA works to eradicate direct violence (beatings, murder) and structural violence (racism, sexism, xenophobia) from Costa Rican society. To do this, CEPPA provides trainings to help people transform violence and conflict on multiple levels of society (schools, families, businesses, community groups, churches, and prisons) by running workshops on communication, cooperation, and creative management of conflict to create a culture of peace. This summer, I plan to employ the skills I developed at the MCAD by helping set up and conduct presentations for prisoners, at-risk youth, young sexual offenders, students, and survivors of domestic violence. In addition to the presentations I will facilitate for CEPPA, I plan to create a research program to evaluate the progress and assess the results of some of the workshops. For this assessment, I will be creating surveys and conducting interviews with participants to follow up after the programs.

Before leaving for Costa Rica, I will take HISP 160a Culture and Social Change in Latin America to analyze how work within the cultural realm can shape change regarding issues of justice, the rule of law, the rights of minorities, and the organization of the nation.

Going back to Latin America for the first time, I look forward to seeing things as an adult with everything I have learned since I was in Ecuador at age 14. Helping set up and conduct the

CEPPA programs, I hope to gain an understanding of this type of grassroots work and its methods of transforming issues of violence and inequality at their roots within Costa Rican society. With my research and assessment work, I hope to measure the effectiveness of these methods and their ability to bring about non-violence and change (and possibly gain ideas for their improvement). In the end, I hope to come back to Brandeis with new ideas for challenging systems of inequality and cycles of violence that I see all around me through active grassroots work and the creation of a peaceful culture and society.