

Lumos Final Report  
Rachel Butler  
Buenos Aires, Argentina  
Fall 2014 (August 1 – December 1)

Summarizing up my four months in Argentina is a daunting task. Though the months flew by, everything I learned about the country, its people, and all the experiences I had in my volunteer work are deeply etched in my heart. As I've imagined trying to best communicate what I experienced through my Lumos trip, I've divided what I want to say in to four categories: information about Argentina, details about my host family, details about the volunteer work I did, and all that I learned about culture and friends.

### **Section I: Argentina**

Before I talk about anything else, I want to give an introduction to Argentina. I learned through my trip that in order to help people, you've got to understand where they're coming from (even in something as simple as geographical terms).

When I left on July 31, 2014 to travel to Buenos Aires, I only knew a tiny bit about the country. As I planned my Lumos proposal, I was drawn to Buenos Aires because of the volunteer and host family program I found. In terms of prior travel to other Spanish-speaking countries, I had travelled to Spain, Mexico, and Ecuador. I knew that Argentina would be very different, so I was eager to take on the challenge. Prior to my trip, all I really knew was that Argentina was a large country, it's in the Southern Hemisphere (so my trip would fall in spring/summer weather), and that tango was developed there. Looking back, I was fairly uneducated about Argentina, but there was no better way to learn than to go.

The first thing that presented me with a steep learning curve in Argentina was the way everyone spoke Spanish. When I told Argentines that I had come with hopes to improve my Spanish, they would laugh. Argentine Spanish, also known as castellano, is very distinct. The Spanish spoken in Buenos Aires is known for being spoken incredibly fast, and with a unique double "l" sound. This developed because of the great influence of Spanish and Italian people in the city. Along with the pace and double "l" sound, when speaking Spanish, portenos (people that live in Buenos Aires) use the form "vosotros" instead of "tu". There is also a completely different set of vocabulary, called "lunfardo" that is not found in any other country. This set of vocabulary came out of La Boca, the main port town in the city. A great mix of people settled La Boca, and this vocabulary developed there so that people who didn't even speak the same language could understand a few common words.

Argentina is a very complicated country, to say the least. On July 31, 2014, Argentina defaulted on their loans from the U.S. again. They had a serious economic crisis in 2001, and have been struggling to recover ever since. In the early 1900s, Argentina was the seventh richest country in the world. Since then, the country has faced a long and steady decline, and has been plagued with inflation. In October of 2014, I was able to exchange 1 US Dollar for 15.01 Argentine pesos. Argentines consistently fear inflation and crime. Most of them acknowledge that the Argentine peso may be worthless soon, so if they want to save any money, they save US dollars. This is one reason why US Dollars are so incredibly sought-after in Argentina. I had never been in a place that was so filled with political and economic tension. The current president, Cristina Kirchner, is fulfilling a long-

time legacy of corruption. Poverty and crime are on the rise in Argentina, and there is a general consensus of frustration among the people in regards to the state of their beloved country.

## Section II: Host Family

One of my favorite parts about my entire trip was living with my host family. I lived in Palermo SoHo in a house with four other people. My host parents were named Jose and Estela, and they have lived in Buenos Aires their entire lives. Estela is an architect, and Jose is a physiatrist. Their grand-nephew, Nacho (age 19), and their best friend's daughter Micaela (age 23) also lived with us. Mica and Nacho are both from surrounding provinces, and live with Jose and Estela during the school year so they can attend college in the city.



Living with Jose, Estela, Mica, and Nacho was where I learned most about the culture of Argentina and what it's really like to live there. Jose and Estela have two daughters (who have now moved out and have their own families) but they came over almost every Sunday for lunch. It was with my host family that my Spanish progressed by leaps and bounds, it was where I ate delicious Argentine food every night, and where I had thought-provoking conversations about politics and religion. I am still in contact with Jose, Estela, and Mica. On my last night in Buenos Aires, they made me a "last supper" and threw me an early birthday celebration. They were also incredibly kind and allowed my fiancé to stay with them when he visited me during the last week of my stay. Jose and Estela welcomed me with open arms and we grew to love each other as we learned more about one another. Jose is coming to the US to visit me and two of his other past exchange students this March! I cannot imagine having this experience without them. Through my relationship with them, I learned that people change you for the better more so than any place or job can.

### Section III: Volunteer Work

My volunteer work was concentrated in two different schools. The first school, Fundamind, is a government-subsidized preschool. The city of Buenos Aires funds the all-day preschool. The mission of Fundamind reads as this: "Our mission is that all children would have the opportunity to; grow healthily, receive adequate nutrition, recreation, and education, and be protected against all forms of violence, abuse, and discrimination. We support the rights of children.



The picture above features a doll one of the teachers made with a speech bubble that reads "Soy chiquito pero tengo grandes derechos", or "I am small but I have big rights".

My volunteer work at Fundamind started with me helping on Tuesdays and Thursdays in a 4-year olds classroom. I would assist the teacher in any way she needed. Most of the classrooms were overpopulated, leaving one teacher with about 30 children

ages 4 and under. A 30-student classroom seems fairly normal for elementary school, but in a preschool with only one teacher and a small, small classroom...30 kids can mean chaos. All of the children at Fundamind came from families living under the poverty line, so there was no tuition and breakfast/lunch were free for the kids. Quite a few of the children had unique behavioral issues/tendencies because of their family situations at home, but the teachers at Fundamind were always patient and loving. About two weeks in to my volunteer work with Fundamind, the 4-year old teacher found out I could play the piano and that I originally went to Belmont to study music. She excitedly exclaimed, "We've been looking for a music teacher for months! We got a piano donated to us and no one uses it, and the children need music. I will have to tell the director!" That week, I found myself in the director's office, making a weekly schedule so that I could enter every classroom each week and conduct 30-minute music classes with the children.

This is the room with the beloved piano:



Though I felt fairly unprepared, I agreed to become the new "music teacher" for Fundamind. I went home that night and learned some Spanish children's nursery songs, and also found kid's songs that could be sung in both English and Spanish. The Itsy Bitsy Spider, If You're Happy and You Know It, Clap Your Hands and Head, Shoulders, Knees, and Toes have translations in Spanish that are fairly similar. I used this to my advantage, and eventually had the 4-year olds singing "Head, Shoulders, Knees and Toes" in both Spanish and English. I loved being able to introduce the kids to English through song, and they were always fascinated to hear me sing in English.

Though music seems like a pretty normal thing to most of us, it is because we were privileged to grow up with some sort of exposure to music/the arts. Some days in "music class" I would just play songs on the piano, and I will always remember the first time I played a Scott Joplin ragtime for the kids. As soon as I started, the kids just started clapping, and continued clapping (and not to the beat) throughout the entire song. The teachers desperately tried to shush the kids, but I assured them that it was okay. For most of the children, it was the first time they heard someone play a piano. One of their favorite activities was to come up, one at a time, and touch a few keys on the piano. Their faces

would light up as they played, and I hope this exposure created an interest and appreciation in the kids for music.

Though I was very surprised with what my volunteering at Fundamind turned into, I am very glad that I was flexible and decided to really embrace the new title as their music teacher.

My original volunteer plan in Buenos Aires was to teach English, and I did get to do that at Colegio San Tarcisio every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. The days I wasn't at Fundamind, I took the bus to this private school (K-12) and taught in 7<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade English classes. I also stayed afterschool two days a week to tutor kids for their upcoming English certification exams. In order to graduate from this high school (and in order to be accepted to a university), students had to pass their English classes. Many of the students at Colegio San Tarcisio also had dreams of studying abroad or working in the United States, so they really took English classes seriously. I formed the deepest connection with my 7<sup>th</sup> grade English class. All semester, we worked our way through "Number the Stars" by Lois Lowry, a book based on true accounts of the Holocaust. Every Friday I would read aloud the next chapter in the book, and throughout the week the students wrote papers and summaries about what they learned. At the end of the semester, we visited the Jewish museum in Buenos Aires. October was "reading month", and all month the students and I prepared books in English to read aloud to the younger students. Learning English can really change these kid's lives in the long run. As I mentioned before, many of them had dreams of going to the U.S. one day. This made me reflect on all the teachers that invested in my Spanish learning who eventually made it possible for me to follow my dream and travel to Spain, Ecuador, and finally Argentina. I have been changed forever by these experiences, especially by all the people I've met. I truly hope that these 7<sup>th</sup> grade kids can use their English one day to travel and meet people they never would have been able to before.



I am still in contact with two of my students from that seventh grade class. They all sent me a video message on my birthday (just 5 days after I left) and sent me many congratulatory messages on my wedding day.



I am thrilled to say that teaching in at Colegio San Tarcisio really helped me discover my passion for teaching. I recently found out I was accepted to the New York City Teaching Fellows program, and starting this September I will be teaching in a Bilingual Education Class in the New York Public School System and will be working on simultaneously on obtaining my masters in Bilingual Education through the Fellows program.

#### **Section IV: Culture, Friends (and extracurricular travel)**

The geography of the country itself is incredible unique. Argentina is the eighth largest country in the world, and the second largest in South America. Though I spent most of my time in Buenos Aires, I was able to travel throughout the country on some weekends. My first trip was to Mendoza, which is on the Eastern side of the Andes mountain range. I took a 13-hour, overnight bus to explore the town for the weekend. Mendoza is known for its stunning mountain views and for its wine. While I was there, I was able to hike in the Andes, see some snow, and go on a winery tour.



The second place I travelled to (and also my favorite) was Iguazu Falls in the province of Misiones, which is on the border of Brazil and Argentina. I'll let the pictures speak for themselves.



Apart from travelling on some weekends, a typical weekend activity in Argentina is to have an asado. An asado is an Argentine barbeque, and you can expect to eat meat and bread and drink wine until it's bed time. Argentines take their meat very seriously, and to have an asado means you also must have a skilled asador (barbequer) who will care for the meat and tend to the coal grill for hours. October and November meant the start of summer in Buenos Aires, and there's no better time for a barbeque than in the summer. Though there aren't usually backyards or common areas for apartments in Buenos Aires, it's fairly common to have a terraza (terrace). Our house had one, and we had many asados on the terrace during those summer nights.



One of the most common dishes at an asado is "Choripan", which is chorizo (sausage) and pan (bread). A key component to this sandwich is chimichurri sauce!



The hardest part of my trip was not really having community/friends at the start. When I went to Argentina, I didn't know anybody, and nobody there knew me. An added challenge was the language barrier. Though I had studied Spanish, I was by no means fluent. Being able to pass a grammar test is much more different than being able to have a comfortable conversation and let your personality shine through. It took me about a month and a half to get confident enough in my Spanish to really be "myself" in the language. When I was able to start making jokes and get people laughing, I knew I had hit quite a milestone.

While I was in Buenos Aires, I regularly attended church. This church is where I found some of my closest friends, as the church had a "grupo de jovenes" (group of young people) that met every Sunday before the evening service. I met these friends about a month in, and that was when my trip really started to change. My first month was pretty lonely and filled with many challenges, but when I established a community of friends, everything changed. My challenges and occasional homesickness didn't vanish, but I had people I could share that with. This trip really helped me realize the value and necessity of community. Three of the girls I met in Argentina are some of the best friends I've ever made. The girls were not obligated to be my friend – my Spanish wasn't perfect and I could barely navigate the city at first.... but over and over again they extended grace to me and loved me without even really knowing who I was. The love and grace they showed me reflected the love of Christ that was alive in their hearts, and I hope to be more like them.





To completely explain my trip in a report, presentation, or conversation would be impossible. For that reason, I am happy to let it continue to shape who I am, how I see the world, and how I see and treat others.