

I have been back in the States for about one week now, staying busy between moving into a new space, seeing friends in Nashville, preparing my Lumos presentation, and now visiting my family up in Chicago. I spent the final hour on the flight into Nashville reading letters from friends and from my host family, tears welling up and releasing. I love crying on planes. There is nowhere to go and nobody familiar, engine roars mask the sound of sniffing and, if you're like me, your face remains still, dramatically looking out the window (cue "Here Comes Goodbye" by Rascal Flatts once more).

As I am certain any former Lumos traveler can attest to, it has been a challenge putting together an answer to, "How was your trip?!" Usually I get stuck after, "Incredible!" and fumble through describing what I love about the city of Buenos Aires after a few seconds of blank stares. The truth is that I could never quite put into words all that I experienced or felt or learned the past 5 months. So let me start small: I speak Spanish! I may not be fluent (yet, fingers crossed) or fully bilingual but I shared a home and had complex conversations with my fully Spanish-speaking host family daily, which I have to remind myself is no small thing. This will benefit me as a nurse and my Spanish-speaking patients for the rest of my career. Since being back, I have already communicated with Spanish speakers on two separate occasions. I feel that a new level of neighborliness, of community, of local engagement has been opened to me—there is a new realm of possibility in communicating with the people around me, especially in my work at the Public Health Department in Nashville. I plan to continue taking classes in the States and have looked into programs, such as those organized by Casa Azafrán, that connect English speakers with Spanish speakers for weekly exchanges/practice/community building. One of my main goals in planning this project was to return with an improved ability to provide healthcare to our neighbors with Spanish communication needs, and I think that while I am still continuing to learn, this goal was obtainable. I also experienced the challenges of living in a country that functions in a different language than my own, gaining first-hand understanding of just some of the obstacles facing those who move away from their home countries.

Another goal of mine was to strengthen my skills as a doula and healthcare worker, as well as progress in my training, and provide empathetic care to my patients in the hospital of Moron. Throughout the course of my project, I participated in several workshops led by my host mom, Ana, a well-seasoned professional doula. The workshop topics ranged from breastfeeding basics to caring for the placenta in postpartum. I also took Ana's doula training course, once as an observer in June, and again as a participant and graduate in September. My placement in Hospital de Moron included 3 shifts per week and our primary responsibility was to serve the emotional needs of women in labor, in postpartum, and with infants in the NICU. While the first few months we're challenging from a language perspective, my prior experience as a volunteer doula at Vanderbilt provided me with a basic understanding of my role and a foundational skill set that did not require much need for communication (i.e. non-pharmacological pain management, distraction techniques, massage, aromatherapy). Coaching women through birth and breastfeeding, providing a listening ear to their hopes and concerns, advocating their needs to the healthcare team, and serving as a silent companion in a busy environment were some of the ways me and the other volunteers helped contribute to our patient's wellbeing. Moron is a province outside of the city of Buenos Aires and the public hospital serves a population with few healthcare resources. In the hospital many of the birthing mothers were under 20 years old and had little education beyond primary school. Birth control options and sex education is scarce, and many of the women we worked with felt

more comfortable complying with the doctor's suggestions than advocating for their wants or needs. A practical (and frequent) way in which we saw this occur, and in which us doulas helped advocate for our patients, was in the laboring rooms when a woman was seemingly solo and their accompaniment (i.e. mother or partner or friend) were outside in the waiting room. Oftentimes the patient did not speak up that they had someone there with them and the accompaniment didn't ask to be brought inside either. Neither did the doctors or nurses make an effort to include them in the process until the very last minute. When we discovered that they had a loved one passively waiting outside while the patient sat alone progressing in labor, we were the ones to communicate with the healthcare team and retrieve the accompanying person as early as possible. There were many small ways in which we worked to create a more equitable, personal environment for the women in Moron, something I can continue to work to do here in my job in the States.

It doesn't take long living in Argentina to realize that politics are a hot topic there. Since the dictatorship ended in the early 80's, building themselves as a democracy has been filled with political polarization. Over time, I learned from a diverse variety of people with different socioeconomic backgrounds (my host sisters, my friends, the teachers at school, the doulas I worked with, the patients I took care of) the arguments and values of each side. I also explored the history of their government, including the beginnings of Peronism, through the devastating dictatorship that led to the disappearance of over 30,000 people, up to the modern-day Kirchnerism. Argentina's economic crisis has led to a current inflation rate of 83%—one USD is equivalent to 157 Argentine pesos today. In a country where houses and cars and plane tickets abroad are sold in USD and government loans do not exist, acquiring wealth is extremely difficult. Many of my friends would say things like, "it feels like there is no hope for us young people, except to be politically involved." However, they would also say things like, "we are trapped in chaos, but we have our culture to bind us together." The culture in Buenos Aires is so rich. Traditions like passing mate around at the park, bustling weekend street markets, and futbol games and rivalries. Taking great pride in their asados (barbecue), wine, hospitality, free education system, empanadas, history, and diverse landscapes. The people of Argentina share in their love for their culture, despite their diverse political opinions—something I hope to remember as I return to a very divided country.

I would like to thank Thandi, Shauna, and the rest of the Lumos committee and their donors for trusting me with this project. I would never have been able to make this trip possible without the help of my partner organization, Experiential Learning International, or the Connecting Worlds team in Argentina. Thank you to my parents, my brother, and my wonderful friends for staying in contact with me even when I made it difficult between losing two phones. If you are considering applying to Lumos, my advice is to do a lot of research into your partner organization and get as realistic of a picture as possible of what your work will look like. Consider how your project will impact what you think you want to do with your career, and how your skill set could be used to impact a community or non-profit abroad. When choosing a country, think about what you know of that place and the obstacles you will face—is there a language barrier? If so, do you plan on taking language classes before leaving/during your stay? What kind of societal challenges do the people of that region face? If you'll reside on the other side of the equator will you be in winter for 1.5 years like me? Does the length of your planned stay align with the time it will take to reach your goals? If you already received a Lumos grant and are preparing for your leave, first of all, congratulations! The Board believes in your project and you should take that as a boost of courage! I advise you to bring the things you use daily that make you feel like

yourself to your destination. I had a list of things I thought I needed based on what I thought Argentina would be like, and when I got there I really just wanted my slippers and some nail polish to keep me company. Bring some “American” treats to share with your host and friends, and leave some room in your suitcase to bring back goodies for your loved ones here. Also—get your vaccines early and budget for them (they’re expensive).

Ok, I think that wraps things up. Thanks for following along, supporting me, and checking in. Te quiero :)

Ciao for now,
Kara



From a weekend farmer's market