It has been four years since my time abroad, a fact that I can hardly fathom. While I was living in Rojas, Argentina, Managua, Nicaragua, and San Lucas Tolima, Guatemala in the 2007-2008 school year, the experience completely enveloped me- my senses, my thoughts, my relationships, my clothing, my actions. It was an incredibly rich form of learning that has completely shaped my time at Cornell as an International Agriculture and Rural Development Major. While doing my experience prior to arriving at Cornell is untraditional, I feel there were several major value-additions, if you will, to completing it beforehand.

I did not feel distracted or pressured or influenced by being an academic student, which I feel let my experiences become more genuine and less studied, analyzed, and restricted than they would have been otherwise. I was able to go abroad for a much longer time than many students were able to manage, which I also feel is beneficial. After my nine-months abroad, I am convinced that the majority of people need a minimum of six months to get settled and form meaningful relationships, a year preferably, so this was also an advantage of my time abroad. Additionally, I was able to have a number of very different experiences back to back, which while not impossible, is beyond the capacity of many students. Lastly, I enjoyed forming my own experience, not being part of a particular program for the entirety of my time abroad, because I feel it took time and initiative and a sense of ownership over my experience that might not be equal to a study-abroad experience.

For this reflection paper, I would like to include snippets from my journal entries or other reflections from those nine months and my eighteen year-old self. I will provide a brief description of my situation in each country and what I accomplished while I was there, followed by these reflections and the date they were made. While I have grown and learned much from and since this experience, I wanted to provide some of the thoughts I was having in the moment. Now, as I look back, everything is framed with the knowledge I have gained at Cornell. I know much more about agriculture, about interacting with people, about theories and practices of development, and so on and so forth than I did when I went on this trip, but I also know that this international experience was integral to my education, in that essentially everything I have learned in this major was relatable in some way to my nine months abroad, and the practicality of that experience is what has kept me dedicated to this field.

**Rojas, Argentina- September and October of 2007**

In Rojas, I lived with a host family, my host sister Andreina Tiseira being the Rotary Exchange Student at my high school in my senior year. While I was planning my year abroad, she very graciously invited me to spend as much time as I wanted with her and her family. I “got my ear” for real, spoken Spanish in my two months with the Tiseira family and I learned a good deal about their cultural values and norms just by participating in daily life with Andreina, her sister, mother, father, grandparents, and aunt, uncle, and two cousins. While I was there, I helped to put on Andre’s senior prom, which was completely different from the American interpretation of prom, I joined the youth choir, went to aerobics class with Andre and my host mom, visited my other sister, Ailen, at her university in Rosario, helped out at my Aunt Laura’s pharmacy with labeling and displays and other small things, and went to a slew of family and friend get-togethers and birthday parties. In my last two weeks, I traveled to Iguazú waterfall with relatives of one of the friends I had made, which allowed me to get to know a number of other
Argentines on the same bus tour. I also visited some distant relatives of mine that live in Buenos Aires, which was a treat as we connected and shared stories about my dad’s family history. In this phase of my year abroad, I became comfortable with my ability to speak and understand Spanish and I learned a great deal about how one should participate in life with a host family. Everywhere I went I was met with genuine hospitality and warmth and I sincerely appreciated the glimpse into a culture that is much more people-centric than my own.

On planning an Argentinean prom, e-mail, September 27, 2007:

“After the Rotary meeting I had a truly Rojense (Rojas is where I’m living if you recall) experience. We went to el galpón (a warehouse) where we had been making decorations for the Spring Dance, Baile de la Primavera, and came to the conclusion that everything was as finished as it would get. So, with much energy and excitement, we grabbed all of the paint brushes and left over paint and headed out to the streets to paint propaganda for el Baile in front of the other schools and in the main Plaza, la Plaza de San Martín. Now, you have to understand that the high schools here are very competitive (There are about 5 schools here, separated by interest: artistic, technical, life sciences, etc. and all of them had Bailes de la Primavera, and each wants their dance to be the best).

So, while we were painting “Baile de la Primavera San Jose” (their school) and our theme “Sólo música a tu alrededor” (Only music around you) and signing out names, all the chicos (kids) were shouting chants against the other schools. Sort of like we do at football games, except this was in the middle of the road at like 2:00 in the morning. Please know that this graffiti was not illegal in the least... the police were swerving around us and what we had painted so as not to smudge it. I found that hilarious. I signed my name everywhere we went, at the insistence of my friend Lucas, and I had such a happy feeling while looking at my name boldly printed alongside everyone else’s. I loved being part of the melee.”

On conversations with my host family, e-mail, October 9, 2007

“The car rides were very enlightening for me. I learned that Rojas, Colón, and Pergamino (three cities here) make a triangle known as el Triángulo de Oro, or the Golden Triangle, because they are recognized as the best (i.e. most fertile) land in the world. El Tío (my host uncle) told me that just because it is the best land doesn’t mean it’s the best used land, but the quality is impossible to bear. I also listened to Leon Guico, who I was told was kind of like an Argentinean Bob Dylan, and used his songs to protest problems here. One that stuck with me was about a man who rode a bicycle everywhere and gave food to boys who couldn’t afford it and was murdered by the police for acting against the military government that was then in place. He is remembered as el angel de la bicicleta, the angel of the bicycle, and people write his name in the streets to this day.

This talk sort of continued on the 6th, in la quinta (family retreat spot), and el Tío described to us (Lena, my Swiss Rotary exchanged sister, and I) how the economy in Argentina fluctuates so much because it is interconnected with politics, which change all the time. At one point in their lifetimes, the peso was equal in value to a dollar, and everyone went on vacations and lived the good life. Following that there was a recession and it was 4 pesos to one dollar, and things were hard. Now it is 3 pesos to a dollar. He also said that unlike the governments in
Switzerland and the U.S. the government here can change back to a military government at any time, especially if countries like the U.S. get involved. Despite this, they aren’t bitter, and take one day at a time not wasting time worrying about the future, but instead focusing on the gift of the present. This is something we Americans could learn from people here, at least in my opinion. Things here have been so bad in the not so far away past, governments that killed people for no reason except suspicions and fear, and yet the people here know how to really live their life without letting the fear of that returning drag them down. It’s amazing and inspiring and something we really haven’t had to deal with in the U.S. much.”

On meeting my Argentinean relatives, e-mail, November 5, 2007

“I had a lot of truly interesting conversation with these two relatives of mine over the two and a half days I spent with them. They recounted their epic 1979 visit to my great grandmother’s house. They had been in Disney World as that year a peso was equal to a dollar so it was really cheap to travel to the U.S. and had a phone conversation with my great grandma Christina. She invited them to come up to New York and they did; as it was January they exchanged sandals and shorts for boots and coats that Cristina had from her bunches of grandkids and took them to their home. Chini and Hector and all of the kids told me that even though they lost touch with our family since Cristina passed away, they never cease thinking about those couple weeks in Pompey and they talk about it all the time.”

Managua, Nicaragua- November 2007

In Managua, I lived in rented rooms with a family along with my host, Hope Michelson, a doctorate student in the Applied Economics and Management Program at Cornell. Hope was instrumental in my decision to take a gap year. I met with her at Chris Barrett’s request in the spring of my senior year of high school and discussed her own gap year before college, the work she was doing, the type of work I was interested in, etc. At the end of our meeting, she invited me to come spend some time with her while she was in the field doing her doctorate research on whether or not small farmers could meet the safety and standards requirements to sell their produce to supermarkets (both a national chain and a Wal-Mart chain) in Nicaragua and therefore determine which farmers could access this new market. I contributed to Hope’s research while in Nicaragua by tracking prices of vegetables in Wal-Mart supermarkets and by making a timeline for the openings of all of the supermarket branches in Nicaragua. Additionally, Hope encouraged me to travel, both with and without her, so I learned about good practices for in-country-travel in developing nations during this phase of my year abroad. I spent a good deal of time at the collaborating university for Hope’s research, the University of Central America, which retrospectively gave me insight into the difference between our institutions stateside and universities abroad. I learned a great deal from Hope herself and consider her to be a great resource and friend, and I feel my relationship with her was the greatest gain from this portion of my trip, though I was also able to learn some about the culture of Nicaragua and travel to quite a number of places within country.

On living arrangements and transportation, e-mail, November 25, 2007
“Our home is beautiful and the family that owns it is super fun. The husband and wife are named Cairo and Belinda, and they have two daughters, Hanoi and Yaosca. They are really sweet and so fun and easy to talk to, and they also won a dog named Vito who is pretty amusing, and a parrot named Pancho who is even more amusing. He mimics Belinda all the time and I always get to listen to him talking to himself in the mornings in that classic parrot voice. “Hola mi amoooooor. Pancho Pancho!” He also laughs exactly the way Belinda laughs, which is sometimes even funnier than his chatting…

The biggest change from Argentina was the heat. It is HOT here. 80’s (but very humid) is the coolest it is and most of the time it is 90’s. It’s hot and sweaty and teaches you a whole other level of patience, which I think is very valuable and it makes me realize how much I take for granted our lovely seasons of respite from the heat. I am definitely looking forward to the snow and cold I hear we’ve been having and being able to put on a sweater without dying when I get home.

On Sunday after arriving I had my first experience with local transportation: the bus. The bus is a nightmare, basically, if you let it bother you, but if you don’t, it’s kind of restful and unifying, knowing that so many other people are enduring the heat and crowd that you are. In order to ride the bus (which we ride to go to the UCA, the Universidad CentroAmericana or the Central American University, where Hope and I work) you have to develop a certain set of skills. For example, if you are going to sit, you should sit toward the back of the bus, and only on the outside of the seat, other wise it is quite possible you will not make it through the wall of people to get out at your stop. …The buses made me really nervous in the beginning, with so many people and needing to know where you are which his not one of my strong points, but I have come to enjoy them actually. It’s an experience that we miss out on in the U.S., one that is both humbling and exciting, as every ride is a small adventure.”

On field visits, e-mail, November 25, 2007

“We traveled with the man Hope was interviewing to see a tomato farm, and I was very impressed. They have special green houses for the bigger tomato variety here, tomate de mesa, and rows and rows of the smaller tomatoes, tomate criollo, that have plastic lined over the spot where the plant enters the ground and irrigation hoses for water and fertilizer spread all along the rows of tomatoes, a huge improvement from less than 10 years ago when they were watering a variety of crops by hand…

After eating breakfast we set off for Estelí, which is a very nice little town on the way back to Managua. This was my first weekend of traveling within Nicaragua, and it’s really interesting. The towns are small enough, that you just arrive, ask where the town center is, and then start walking. When you get to the center, you wander until you find a good hotel. After we did just that, Hope and I went out to explore the market in Estelí. It was much more spread out than the Huembes market in Managua, and we ended up going to a second hand clothing shop which Hope had heard of as being the best in Nicaragua, and we while away a few hours checking out the crazy clothes that only second hand clothing stores have.”

More on the tomato farm, journal, November 9, 2007

“It was pretty smart-seeming to me. The farmers own the business and set a minimum price with Hortifrutí (the buyer) that they must always be paid. But every week they negotiate for a higher
price, and mostly they get it- they are 26 farmers. It’s neat because they run it and with the increased money they are able to improve growing conditions and therefore quality as well. I was quite impressed with the farm we saw…”

San Lucas Tolimán, Guatemala- January through June 2008

San Lucas Tolimán is a picturesque town on the edge of Lake Atitlan in Guatemala, and the six months I spent there were some of the most formative months of my life thus far. In my time there, I served as a long term volunteer at the San Lucas Mission, a Catholic development organization that has existed in the town since the late 1950s and sponsors a wide variety of community development projects. As a long term volunteer, this leg of my trip involved more responsibility than the other two parts, as I had a role to play so that the organization would function well and so that I would learn. I served as a liaison between the Guatemalans who ran the mission projects, ranging from a coffee cooperative to construction to fuel efficient stoves to reforestation and more, and groups of high school and college students and other groups of adults who came down to volunteer for 1-2 weeks. Finally comfortable with my ability to speak Spanish, I built a large number of relationships with Guatemalans young and old who were affiliated with the mission. I also met a number of truly incredible American volunteers who helped me to reflect on the experiences we were sharing and think more deeply about what it means to serve and what it means to work in solidarity to develop a community. The projects I was mainly involved in were the reforestation project, the fuel efficient stove project, and the daily kitchen duties- I was advised early on that it was always a good idea to be friends with your cooks and I quickly befriended the troupe of women who cooked food for all of the mission’s volunteers, short and long term. The huge impact this organization has had on San Lucas Tolima and its people over the past 60 years, both negatively and positively, has fostered, in large part, my motivation to study International Agriculture and Rural Development.

On handouts, Monthly Report to volunteer coordinators, date unknown, 2008

“One of the things I have noticed this month, through several incidents of handouts and the immediate effect they have on the communities, is the importance of proper distribution of goods based on expressed felt need. It is unbelievable how quickly children given candy or toys learn to beg for more. This habit is a terrible thing to teach and completely goes against the request Father Greg (the mission founder) constantly makes, “Do not turn our people into beggars.”

While I have not seen the proper distribution of donations etc. with my own eyes, my understanding of it this past month has deepened. Cleaning out the Bodega (donation storage), we sorted out the school supplies that would be sent to teachers and then fairly given out, medical supplies that would be sent to the clinic and then placed and used where needed, and so on. This process of only giving where need is and doing so in a way that does not encourage begging is so important to ensuring and continuing the development of the community here.

This guideline set by the Parish (mission) allows that well-meaning contributions don’t backfire and cause things to move backwards. It is something I take even more seriously now after seeing what happens when it is not followed and after feeling responsible for my groups’ actions in that respect. This belief of the Parish is certainly one I’ve become more aware of in the last month and will continue to respect and ask of volunteers that are there, whether for short or long amounts of time. It is truly important in order to ensure that the good effects of donations,
filling appropriately expressed felt need, can continue being felt in San Lucas, rather than negative ones.”

On building relationships, Monthly Report to volunteer coordinators, date unknown, 2008

“I walked home in the early afternoon of a certain Sunday this past month full of tortillas, chow mein, and the warm pleasure of having spent the last four hours with a woman who in a surprisingly short amount of time has become very dear to me. Olga (one of our Guatemalan kitchen staff), is not very difficult to become friends with. Earlier that day, I had looked up from my doorstep to see Olga and Frankie, her son, walking hurriedly toward me, and got up smiling, ready and honored to be granted the invitation of spending the day with them. As we wove through the market, I bought granadias, caimitos, mangos, and fruity soaps, guided by Olga and Frankie’s advice and nimble, selective fingers. Finishing up my market shopping, we made our way to her home, which is just around the corner from my own home, but ever so different. As we walked into the kitchen chatting, I took in the humbleness of her home, the wooden soot-streaked walls, the crumbly stove her father had built for her, the loose clucking chickens, the two small buildings for sleeping in, and the pila (washing sink) out back under a makeshift ceiling just a bit too short for me. Despite the fact that our worlds are so different in the sense of the physical things we may have, I discovered that those differences did not separate or inhibit our friendship.

I understood this from the hour and a half we spent chatting about our life, our families, the future and the past, the cranky rooster outside, and the misfortune of having loud music emitting buildings right outside of your doorstep, and all manner of things. I felt this through the following hour or two cutting thick carrots, fresh celery, peppers, and wisquiles and preparing a fresco (lemonade) together as we have so many times before in the kitchen. I saw this as I awkwardly learned to make tortillas with Olga and her mother as patient teachers even as I proceeded to drop enough masa (tortilla dough) on the ground to have made multiple tortillas. I absorbed this while eating lunch with Olga and Frankie and watching with a hidden smile the extra large portion Olga presented to her beloved little boy and her eye on him as he ate every bite. I appreciated this as Olga insisted she should cut the onions, recalling my tendency to cry, and telling me she had “tough eyes” and could handle it.

Looking back on the beauty of those few hours, the reason I cherish them is that every moment was shared easily and completely, from meeting her family, to banging my head on the ceiling of the pila, from sipping the cooling lemon fresco together. Sometimes when I am doing things such as washing dishes or cutting vegetables and pondering how that could possibly make a difference in the world, I tell myself to count all of the thousands of amazing people that have touched my life and have given me the opportunity to touch theirs through a shared moment or experience. And as the names and faces start rushing through my head, I know that even something as simple as preparing and sharing a meal with someone is meaningful and felt. And as Olga’s name comes along in that ever flowing list in my mind, I can smile and go through the growing bank of memories of her and feel gratitude at the fact the she has accepted me and taken me in as a friend and trusted me enough to show me a part of her life that I may never have known. That built trust and friendship tells me that any service, no matter how menial can make a difference, because it can bring two people together to share friendship and happiness that wasn’t there before, and that difference is certainly worth making.”
“Why am I here? I am here first and foremost to learn. When I first came I suppose I thought I was here to help, to make a difference by “improving” someone’s life with a home, stove, etc. What I have come to discover is the very base of serving is humbling yourself to learn and recognize that perhaps you are being helped more than you are helping. But the very act of humbling yourself to serve and to learn- that gives value to the people you are working with. So I am here to be humbled and to serve and be served, but mostly to learn the beauty and generosity and hospitality of another culture, people, and life. Only through learning can you be bettered and better others.”