

2nd Place Winner for AFS International's "My Different View" Essay Contest

Elizabeth Schutze

I stepped off the bus and took a sharp breath of Argentine winter air. The other Americans who had traveled with me had already been engulfed in the huddled mass and whisked away by their host families. I hadn't known what to expect coming to Argentina. Perhaps I was searching for a piece of myself buried within the softly rolling countryside, the chance to become intertwined with the locals, find the blood of another culture running through my veins. What I did not expect was to be standing alone at a foreign bus stop. The cold seeped through my parka like the fear that was slowly dissolving my independent teenager complex. My eyes darted around anxiously. I looked for something I could recognize, something familiar...anything. Without warning, I found my face buried in the front of a stranger's coat. A button was pressing against my eye and the nylon material didn't provide much air circulation. Although I should have been panicking, I was somehow comforted as the person began to rock me back and forth. I raised my head to meet a woman's warm face; darkened skin, slightly crinkled, peppered hair and a crooked smile that made me feel at peace. This was Inés, my Argentine host mother.

When Inés smiles there are two gummy holes where the teeth her husband knocked out used to be. She often ran her fingers along the wide spaces and smiled despite the memories they must have evoked. After a while she would turn to me, shrug, and say *somos mujeres fuertes* (*we are strong women*), *Graciela*, then smile even wider, displaying the rest of her gleaming, untarnished teeth.

Forty, divorced, and mother of three kids, Inés works two jobs to keep her family afloat. She lost faith in the Catholic Church because of her ex-husband's infidelity and instead devotes herself to raising her children. In the midst of all the confusion and struggle in her life, Inés was prepared to take on more, an exchange student. I was a complete stranger, and another strain on the family's resources. Yet Inés opened her three roomed house to me. Initially, she believed that I would provide a new experience for her kids, open their horizons. But my stay had the complete opposite effect; she was the one who changed me.

Inés' home was in a small agricultural community called Pocito, or "little hole". The majority of our neighbors worked to produce the wine the small village in the *Cordillera* was known for. One day after school, Inés and I took our usual walk, but instead of heading towards the market, we walked to the edge of the shriveled vineyard close by. There, stooped amongst the frail branches was a girl about my age. She was clothed in tattered rags and shivering visibly. As we watched her pruning the frigid plants, Inés explained that this was her motivation to work. Argentina's economy was so bad that a vast majority of its people were forced to keep such jobs and often had no opportunity to progress in society. Although Inés was not well off, she was determined never to see her children working in the fields.

Lying in bed that night, I knew that something inside me had shifted. My perception of the entire world seemed skewed and I felt ignorant for not realizing the extent of Inés' success. I live a privileged life. I drive my own car, attend an elite private school, and hire someone else to prune my hedges. However, Inés shattered this limited perspective. Rocking back and forth in her arms that first day at the bus stop, I experienced the tender embrace of Argentina. Attending classes with children whose fingers were mangled from working the vines after school, witnessing the repercussions of spousal abuse, and becoming immersed in a culture with which I formed a passionate love affair caused my life to switch directions. Instead of heading straight ahead in the typical path set before me, I now take time to stop and take note of life's details that would have previously been lost in my peripheral vision. Inés showed me things so that I could feel the Argentineans' strife, their intensity and optimism. Inés allowed me to taste life – cruel, bitter, sweet, passionate – life, for the first time.

Second place for the U.S. goes to Elizabeth Schutze of Dallas, Texas, a returnee who went on the summer program to Argentina in 2005.