

My Abbey experience, then and now.

Prior to studying abroad, I was an average student. I was a junior English major who wanted more than anything to hurry up and graduate. I was tired of school. I went to class, participated when needed, and had a few close friends. My life was average. My life was comfortable. My life was about as drab as a passport without any stamps. The moment that I committed to studying at the Abbey, I decided to view the experience as an adventure. I did not know anyone who was going, and I was about three years older than the average student who would be attending.

Stepping off the crowded bus and onto the pristine Abbey grounds was perhaps one of the scariest and most exciting moments of my life. A surreal feeling swept over me; I had the eeriest notion that everything in my life was about to change. As classes began and assignments began to roll my direction, I discovered that school on a foreign shore had a strange way of helping one find direction. In days, I found myself speaking French for the first time. My reading assignments were long, but my classrooms were alive. My professors were absorbed into their lectures, my peers were focused, and the villagers of Pontlevoy seemed to be canvases that had come to life. Each day, the quaint women in the bakery smiled and greet me with lovely musical voices; the butcher, gruffly, would mutter his own salutation, and the French children would run wildly across the cobblestone streets curious about the strange Americans. For the first time in my life, I participated in a learning atmosphere that occurred beneath a tree, along side an ancient wall, beside a chateau, and at a battleground. Before this experience, I had never truly understood that an education could occur outside of a four-walled classroom. I fell in love.

While in Pontlevoy, I was introduced to the Vales family. A verbose Frenchman and his artistic wife, Daniel and Christine, adopted me as their own and took me wholeheartedly into their home. Many of my evenings were spent practicing my French and aiding them with their English. A priceless relationship unfolded that remains strong even after five years. In fact, since that time, my parents and brother (who they also adopted while he was in France) have spent time with them in their home, and in May 2009 the Vales travelled to Texas and spent a week with my family experiencing a real working ranch. Priceless.

Perhaps the most rewarding experience of my educational pursuits occurred when the group trekked to Paris for a week of intense study. I stood in the Louvre museum and had the history of countless paintings and sculptures explained to me by my professor who had to sit before some of the works because the sheer passion he felt for the art seemed to take his breath from him. Later, my group endeavored on a weekend trip that still touches my heart. I can barely attempt to describe the feeling that I experienced when standing on Omaha beach, I witnessed my professor, with tear-laden eyes, lecture on World War II. *Everything changed.*

As I returned to my native soil, I brought with me a new drive – a passion that I had never known existed. More than anything, I wanted to share with others the way that my professors

had shared their knowledge with me. I wanted the world to remember the beauty that humanity had produced and the terrors that must never happen again.

I started my senior year of college refreshed and goal driven. Now, five years later, my master's degree is completed; I am a faculty member of Midwestern State University, and am currently in the process of my Ph.D. So, yes, my study abroad experience was the most important thing that I have ever done and looking back, I cannot put a price on the experience. You see, for me, it was more than living *in* France – it was living.

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