

EL OTRO LADO

*Exploring the other side
of migration***SARAH PLASTINO**Class of 2007
Wayne, PA

Sarah Plastino

The Tornado bus station in Dallas, Texas, was bustling with customers on a muggy afternoon in late June. A crowd of rowdy men gathered around a TV featuring the Mexico vs. Portugal World Cup Game while boxes carrying gifts were ferried into luggage holds. This scene was the midpoint of my cross-border bus ride, my own symbolic migration, to Celaya, Mexico.

CONTINUED ►



Buses leave daily from local Mexican *tiendas* across North Carolina; my bus left from El Mercado Central in Carrboro and dropped me off in San Louis Potosí forty-eight hours later. It's not such a bad option if you have two days to spare.

Indulging my curiosity and in search of a local-global connection, I journeyed to Mexico to study immigration to North Carolina. My mentor, Dr. Hannah Gill, taught me that a study of immigration cannot be completed on only one side of the border, that the cyclical nature of migration demands an understanding of both sending and receiving communities. With this in mind, I set off for Celaya, a principle source of Carrboro's migrants, to interview migrants' family members and explore *el Otro Lado*.

The ease at which I found families involved in immigration to NC surprised me at first, but I soon came to realize the strength of the connection between our two communities. While I normally arrived at interviews through a complicated social connection, it was just as easy to approach one of the numerous people in the street wearing Carolina hats or t-shirts. I was stunned at what I found on my second interview, down a dusty unpaved street in a neighborhood named Colonia Jacarandas. I sat down next to an altar displaying statues of the Virgin of Guadalupe, and began to ask questions to a lighthearted mother of three named Lupe. Before the interview the only information I knew was that her husband had immigrated to North Carolina out of necessity. Within the first five minutes, however, I determined that he was not only in North Carolina, but that he lived in Carrboro, and that he worked in the kitchen of one of Chapel Hill's most popular restaurants. Looking at pictures she and her sister-in-law Rosario showed me, I saw in them faces that I recognized, men whom I had interacted with before.

When I wasn't searching streets in pursuit of interviews (once trampling through the mud in the pouring rain), I volunteered with the Foundation for Nutrition and Life, the largest food bank in Latin America. I traveled Celaya with

a car-load of young social workers, making home visits to malnourished children, and elderly and disabled residents. We verified that our clients were attending their medical appointments and were showing signs of improvement, and worked with local networks to provide social services to the families. While emotionally challenging at times, I felt privileged for the exposure



to conditions that are largely kept behind closed doors.

I was hosted in Celaya by local Rotary Club members

who offered unending hospitality and assistance with my projects. My two host families included me in their daily lives and made a special effort to show me a good time. My host sisters included me in outings with their friends and the whole family brought me to a cock fight (a culturally-valuable experience, even for a vegetarian like me!). While the bulk of my daily activities in Mexico were spent in resource-poor settings, both of my host families were fairly well-off. The rather odd experience of watching *the Real World* on satellite TV with my host sisters reminded me of just how large the disparity in wealth in Mexico can be.

In addition to my two host families, I developed an especially strong relationship with one wonderful family heavily involved in migration. The Guerrero family has members living in Hillsborough, NC, Chicago, and McAllen, Texas, but maintain a compound of six houses in Celaya where three generations live, work, and play together. The members of the Guerrero family live such joyous lives I realized why immigrants have such a difficult time living in the atomized, individualistic

communities in the United States. Some of my best memories from this summer are with the Guerreros, who showed me the richness of Mexican family life. They made sure I was invited in their never-ending festivities, which included a camping trip to the hot springs, a day at the rodeo, birthday parties with piñatas and tug-of-wars, karaoke to Ranchera music, and afternoons spent driving around to different migrant communities in the mountains. I spent the evenings cooking with the aunts, talking about life in the U.S. with the uncles, and playing Lotería (Mexican bingo) with the kids.

Mexico turned out to be one of the most meaningful experiences I have ever had. I was able to pursue my passions with exciting intensity and direct my own research. I was in the center of, and in fact a part of, a truly transnational community. Upon my return, I was inspired to create the first international APPLES Alternative Spring Break trip to give other students the same opportunity I was so fortunate to have received. Dr. Gill and I led a group of ten students back to Celaya this spring to share our experiences of Celaya with a stellar group of ten students. My second trip was a long-anticipated reunion with the Guerreros and the Rotarians and a chance to enable my fellow students to become immigrant advocates as well.

More than any other experience in my time at Carolina, my Burch Fellowship impacted my understanding of the world, molded and focused my passions, and galvanized me to action. I have a sneaking suspicion that this second trip to Celaya was not my last.

