



**Ángel Vilalta**  
1926-2021

### Remembering Ángel Vilalta

Few names anywhere evoke the fond memories and affection that Ángel Vilalta's does at School Year Abroad. He was the pillar of SYA Spain for more than three decades and an inspiring mentor to generations of students. Through thousands of classes, meals, conversations and walking tours, he challenged young Americans to rethink the world and their place in it – whether the subject was art, culture, language or politics. Students quickly began to “think in Spanish” because there was something they had to say. We are grateful to Russell Martin ES'69, for leading the tributes included here, and to fellow alumni and faculty for sharing theirs.

The world lost one of its brightest lights with the passing of Ángel Vilalta in his beloved Barcelona on Saturday morning, June 5, 2021. He was a man who, for almost a century, was utterly devoted to his family and legion of friends, a man of great passion and intellect and grace. He became the heart and soul of School Year Abroad Barcelona — he *was* the school in many respects — and he will live on as the spirit of SYA Spain for decades to come.

Ángel Vilalta Bernet was born on July 12, 1926, in the small Catalan city of Lleida, about 150 kilometers west of Barcelona. Like all natives of the region, Ángel grew up profoundly understanding that Catalunya was his true homeland, and that — as was the case in the Basque country — its language, history, and culture separated his region dramatically from the rest of Castilian-speaking Spain. His father, Rafael, was a prominent businessman who repeatedly had declined overtures for him to enter politics; his mother, Montserrat, he remembered devotedly, was one of those beautiful, miracle-making Spanish women who — once the Spanish Civil War had altered their lives dramatically — could prepare her

family a fine meal even on the many occasions when there was virtually no food in the house. It was hunger, constant and nagging hunger, that remained Ángel's fundamental memory of the war — that and the haunting moments he could never forget when his mother cradled her children beneath her own body to protect them as fascist forces bombed the city and she feared their roof would collapse and kill them.

Rafael Vilalta's business was an early casualty of the war, and so too was Ángel's health. He contracted tuberculosis — as did thousands in Spain in those years — and it may have been for that reason, or simply because four children were a great challenge to feed absent any income, that he was sent to live with an aunt and uncle for a time in the midst of the brutal fighting that transformed virtually all of Catalunya into a killing zone. Although no farther away than nearby Mollerussa, Ángel missed his parents and brothers and sister enormously, and only relatively recently had he come to know how much his parents lost during those tragic years when he was away. "We were so happy before the war," Montserrat Vilalta told her youngest son shortly before she died at ninety-one. "We laughed so much, and our lives seemed very good. But afterward, life didn't seem joyful anymore."

It probably is not a surprise that Ángel was blessed to have an extraordinary teacher enter his life early on. A young, bright, and inspiring teacher had come to Lleida from Barcelona not long after the end of the terrible war, and after class one day she had wanted to speak to the dark and intense young man who had seemed troubled by the state-mandated chauvinism he heard in a class called "Great Ideas of the Spanish Empire." Privately, secretly, she had wanted him to know that *el imperio español es una vergüenza*. "The Spanish empire is shameful. It is not, was not, something great. But we do have good things in Spain, you know. Spain has produced much that truly is great."

Carmina Pleyan, who became a treasured and lifelong friend of Ángel's, assured him on that long-ago afternoon that Lope de Vega, the prolific dramatist of Spain's sixteenth-century golden age, had been a national treasure and was the Spanish world's William Shakespeare. "La Celestina," the fifteenth century play by Fernando de Rojas, remained one of the first masterpieces of world literature, she explained, and was the most influential work of the early Renaissance. Miguel de Cervantes's great novel *Don Quixote* would be read round the world for all time, to be sure; and there were the great painters — Goya, El Greco, Velázquez — in which all Spaniards should take great pride. Even today, she wanted her pupil to know, Spain continued to produce great painters. A man who had been born in Málaga before the turn of the century, and who had grown up in nearby Barcelona, was the greatest painter alive, she believed. He lived in France and could not return to Spain following Franco's victory in the war, but he

was Spanish in every way, and yes, of a man like Pablo Picasso her students comfortably and rightly should be very proud.

Ángel enrolled in the University of Barcelona in 1945, soon after he, his parents, and brothers and sister had moved from Lleida to the city in hopes of recapturing some of the health, prosperity, and familial joy they had known before the war. By 1951, Ángel had earned a law degree, then he spent two years at the University of Houston in the United States studying commercial law and teaching Spanish before returning to the Mediterranean city that enchanted him, the place, he knew, where he wanted to spend his life.

He joined a Barcelona law firm specializing in international commerce, but he already harbored misgivings about whether his work was truly fulfilling him when, in the spring of 1964, his friend Will Watson, an American historian at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology who had lived in Barcelona while researching the civil war, wrote to request his assistance. Phillips Academy, a preparatory school in Andover, Massachusetts, planned to open a school-year-abroad program in Barcelona, and Watson had offered to do what he could to help his alma mater recruit Spanish faculty members as well as someone who could find suitable host families for a dozen American students. Ángel was intrigued by the school's goal of enlarging the international visions of young Americans, and he soon decided a bit of teaching would be a welcome adjunct to his other work. But by the time I met him four years later, his law career was entirely behind him, and he had become, without question, the most indispensable member of the program's Barcelona staff.

Ángel wasn't far beyond boyhood himself in those earliest years of the program that was called School Boys Abroad. But in the eyes of us bona fide boys, he seemed remarkably sophisticated. Short, dark, possessed of sparkling eyes and hands that dramatically highlighted his speech, he was decidedly debonair, always impeccably dressed and disarmingly charming, his spirits seldom sagging, even at those times when we did our devilish best to weigh him down. He was witty and patient and could be counted on to provide us with a fountain of Iberian information. In worldly and alluring Barcelona, he was our go-between, our safety net, our confessor, and even — when the rare occasion seemed to warrant it — our corruptor. But more than anything else, Ángel Vilalta was willing to extend to us a *fuerte abrazo* of friendship despite the fact that we were often inattentive adolescents who hailed from a country that seemed to have forgotten how to behave in the world.

Sometimes he suffered criticism from his contemporaries for devoting his manifold talents simply to us, and his patient response was that he hoped he could play a role in making these American boys a bit

less jingoistic, a little less self-obsessed than they otherwise would grow up to be. Whether the occasion was opera at Barcelona's Liceu or "Guantanamera" sung at the apartment in Gracia he shared with his mother; whether the subject was the CIA's covert work against popular uprisings in Latin America or the promise of a poet and senator named McCarthy who lately had run for the American presidency; whether he was marveling with us at La Alhambra in Granada or reveling with us in the classroom in a moment of high hilarity — his wonderful laugh overtaking him like a seizure — Ángel continually demonstrated that the best kinds of men were inquisitive and energetic, courageous yet compassionate, attuned to the breadth of the world's worries and pleasures but also equally focused on family and friends.

The professors from the University of Barcelona whom Ángel had recruited to be our instructors ran the risk, we understood, of losing their jobs and being jailed if their clandestine activities and alliances were discovered, and like many of them, Ángel too had been arrested — his crimes the joint letters of protest he and his friends sometimes believed they had no choice but to write, the secret assemblies they held, the banned books found in their possession.

Ángel hated the Franco dictatorship with fiery totality, yet he never lost hope that one day Spain would be a democracy again. And at last — a few years after I left Barcelona and very reluctantly said goodbye to him, Franco died and his hand-picked successor, Prince Juan Carlos, was elevated to king. "When Juan Carlos was sworn in," he told me much later, "the bishop who swore him, Bishop Tarancón, a very brave man, gave a wonderful speech — which, of course, Juan Carlos must have approved of in advance — telling him, 'Your Majesty, you have not become king for yourself, but for the Spanish people. You now are called to help all Spaniards, whoever they are, whatever they say.' It was then for the first time that we felt things would go well for us.

"And they did go well, of course. It was wonderful, really. The first election the king called was simply to ask the question: Spaniards, do you want to continue with the current system, or do you want to transform Spain into a Western democracy? I remember that a BBC journalist asked the king if he was happy with the answer the voters gave him, and replied, yes, of course. Then the man asked, would you have accepted it if your countrymen would have chosen not to change, and Juan Carlos told him, 'I would have accepted it, but it would have made me very sad.'"

At a dinner in his honor at a Washington, DC Spanish restaurant in the autumn of 2004, I encountered Ángel, standing alone, admiring a photograph of King Juan Carlos hanging on the wall of the restaurant's bar. I asked him if he remembered how he had spoken to us thirty-five years earlier with bitter

condescension about Juan Carlos — how surely he was being trained to become Franco’s puppet — he said, “Of course, how could we think anything else? How could we imagine that Franco would choose someone so different from himself? But thank God we were wrong. You know, Franco detested the Spanish people. He despised us and that was why he was so cruel. But our king turned out to be just the opposite. He trusts the Spanish people more than he trusts anything else.”

When I set out a few years before that evening to write a book about the bombing of the Basque town of Gernika by the German Luftwaffe and Picasso’s subsequent creation of the enormous painting that would become “Guernica,” it would have been impossible for me not to place the man who had introduced me to that painting at the center of my story. And the greatest good fortune of my opportunity to write that book was being able to renew my friendship with Ángel, the extraordinary teacher who had inspired so many young Americans to set their sights very high. I sadly had said good-bye to him thirty-two years before, certain that we would rendezvous again before long, yet somehow that reunion had had to wait until then. I couldn’t be sure whether he truly would remember me; I was only one of thousands of his students, after all. Yet during three remarkable days we were able to create once more an ineffable bond that teachers and their students sometimes share, a link we remade as readily as if we had been separated only a month or two. I marveled at how ebullient Ángel remained at seventy-five, how passionate he continued to be about life and art, and I was reminded too that the richest relationships in our lives often do not depend on daily contact for their sustenance.

We reminisced about the shared days when both of us had been far younger and remembered how pessimistic he had been back then that Spain would ever be free of oppression. He recalled the years of the civil war with a kind of detail that visibly unsettled him; he remembered, reluctantly, the persecution that had sent him and fellow artists and intellectuals to jail, and he described the miracle of King Juan Carlos with the zeal of a converted monarchist. He showed me with obvious pride the impressive art collection that was the product of a lifetime spent supporting young and emerging artists, and we spoke at length about “Guernica,” the painting that first had stirred his emotions when he too was young and eager to live a life that mattered.

I was honored to be able to visit Ángel a few more times in the years when he became quite old, and the final time was two years ago when my wife Sher and I spent a wonderful hour-and-a-half with him at the senior-care center where he lived in the city’s upland Sarrià district. I’m sure that it was out of deference to Sher’s presence that he insisted on speaking English throughout our brief visit — something he said he *never* did anymore — and he was pleased to discover, I could tell, that he still could speak it so well. He was delighted, too, by the nickname with which virtually all his caregivers addressed him. To a

person, they were women from the south or from northern Africa who spoke only *castellano*, and to them Ángel was plainly and simply “*Guapo*.” His eyes sparkled every time he heard the name — and yes, Ángel Vilalta was handsome and he was beautiful in every way. He lived an extraordinary life and all of us who knew him were blessed by him and I wish beloved Ángel and his enormous spirit Godspeed.

—Russell Martin ES'69

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My late husband, Clark Vaughan, the founder of SYA, arrived in Barcelona about a month ahead of the rest of the faculty and students. We met Ángel within the first week of our arrival in Barcelona. This meeting was fortuitous. Ángel turned out to be the perfect person for then Schoolboys Abroad.

He had a wide range of valuable contacts. He convinced many skeptics that the program was a good idea and could succeed. The concept of having a foreign student live with your family was new in Barcelona. It took several months to find families for all eleven of the original students. Ángel was key to the success of this. Without Ángel, the program might not have survived its first year.

Ángel understood SYA from the start and always looked past problems to find deeper meaning and long-term solutions that helped SYA's success. He had incredible patience. He was an original thinker. He was also very handsome, intelligent, charming, an intellectual who quickly became devoted to SYA. If there was ever a problem with one of the foster families, Ángel could always negotiate and mediate a good resolution. He had a knack for making tough situations easier to accept. He was extraordinary.

—Polly Vaughan Fleischer ES'69P

Widow of SYA founder Clark Vaughan

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Ángel Vilalta was a once-in-a-life time teacher that every SYA student fortunate enough to spend a year in Barcelona will never forget. He was “Mr. SYA” in Spain, and even more, “Mr. Spain.” In the classroom, on the trips, in counseling students on family relationships and daily life, Ángel influenced every part of the student's experience. His enthusiasm had no bounds. He seemed ageless, able to express a passion for Spain and for life that proved contagious and unforgettable to American young students (and to faculty, too) for over thirty years.

— Hal McCann

*SYA Executive Director, 1975-1986*

*SYA Spain Resident Director, 1986-1991*

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Although I did not know Ángel as my classroom teacher, when I first met him as a wet-behind-the-ears executive director in 1986 I sensed immediately that I had a lot to learn about SYA, about Spain, about art, and about the world from this older and much-wiser man. So, I listened. And I understood that for Ángel the mission of SYA was much broader, much deeper, than teaching just literature and language. It was to help young Americans shed their naiveté and arrogance in order to become moral, productive, and empathetic citizens in an ever-changing world.

Ángel was the heart and soul of SYA Barcelona from its founding in 1964 until his retirement in 1998, and he introduced the beauties of the city and the complexities of our little school there to each new resident director and faculty member from the U.S. with unmatched warmth, grace, and patience. The tours he led, the classes he taught and the late-night (very late!) dinners I shared with Ángel were always the highlights of my trips to Spain. When it became clear that SYA could no longer ensure full immersion in *castellano* in the host families, and that the school would have to find another home, I realized two things: 1) the school could not leave Barcelona until Ángel retired, and 2) we would need his support to make the transfer. His agreement that the long-awaited resurgence of Catalan language in Barcelona and Catalunya required SYA to move was crucial; his approval of the new city was important reassurance that we were on the right track; and once the school was established in Aragón, Ángel showed his undying love for SYA by traveling each year to Zaragoza to ensure that each new class of students understood the important roots of the organization.

With Ángel now gone, will anyone as kind and as generous of spirit come along to take his place in our history and in our hearts?

— Woody Halsey FR'97P FR'97P CN'00P FR'01P IT'04P

*Former SYA Executive Director and President, 1986-2011*

*SYA France Residence Director, 1980-1986*

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Ángel was already a legend when I met him at Phillips Exeter Academy one summer at the end of the 1970s. Our common heritage made it easy for us to develop a friendship that would last many years.

Ángel was my support and my right hand when I went to Barcelona as a resident director. I trusted his experience and made many important decisions consulting with him. He had an insatiable intellectual curiosity; his energy was boundless; his enthusiasm contagious.

I often wondered why, year after year, students were fascinated with him. He upheld traditional values, but he felt at home in a changing world. He knew how to make complicated concepts easy and brought the students to a level of understanding and depth that marked their lives forever. He was able to share generously with others the richness of his personality.

—*Francesca Piana*

*SYA Spain Resident Director, 1992-1997*

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No single person in SYA's fifty-seven-year history embodies the essence and the beauty of SYA more or better than Ángel Vilalta, the great man who left a guaranteed and comfortable future career as a Barcelona lawyer to take a risk on an American school some friends of friends were about to start. Year after year, well after SYA had moved from Barcelona and Ángel had retired (in word only!), our dearly beloved Catalan rebel proved his mettle as an innate mentor and inspirational teacher by connecting with our students every spring when he came to Zaragoza. It was a ritual our faculty anticipated weeks in advance.

The students marveled as his ability to jump back and forth from Castilian to English to Catalan, apologizing needlessly all the while, as he made SYA vividly familiar yet astounding to the year's new batch of students. Every year, a student or two would be brought to tears by his stories, and almost every student hugged and/or kissed him as he left after his brief two or three days with us. The magic connections he spoke of with his students and his concern for their struggles never left him. Even our students, who had never had him in class, listened to and knew how much he cared about and stayed in touch with his students. The gift only the greatest teachers have is that connection — tough or gentle — which Ángel always had with SYA students.



Whether it was in classes he visited or surprising them at their *descanso* coffee in the morning or over a meal at midday, Ángel brought his dramatic flair, brought to life snippets of the Spanish Civil War, his family's starving periods under Franco, his passionate contempt for dictatorship, his chance encounter with Picasso, his love of all art forms and his unswerving love of American democracy.

During these frequent visits to Zaragoza, the entourage of all the staff was never outside earshot of his every word, smiling, snickering or just swooning at how wise, how smart, how tireless and, indeed, how fearlessly opinionated he was as he held court with us. He loved a debate or any kind of verbal challenge, as Ángel believed deeply in Socratic methods, open to all students and staff at all times, ready for a hot discussion! For us, time with Ángel was the quintessential form of professional development and the reinforcement of the mission statement we all embraced: using the ten months with our students to launch their global citizenship and passion to be talented, empathetic, respectful, and forever learning. He often went back to the hotel early but left us all with enough thoughts and conversation about him and the life he led to go on well into the night. And, of course, now to carry the remembrance of his life into our days.

We loved Ángel Vilalta as we would a favorite relative because, bringing the entire SYA community into his world was his love for us all as his family. Thank you, Ángel.

—Griffin Morse

*SYA Spain Resident Director, 2002-2014*

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Hablar de Ángel es hablar de libertad, de humanidad y de estética, de la pasión y la lucha diaria por lograr un mundo mejor gracias a la fe en la juventud y en el papel que la misma puede jugar, es recordar su entusiasmo para hacernos ser mejores personas, es recordar su voz y sus manos narrando el horror de las guerras y transmitiendo su firme creencia en la necesidad de conocer nuestro pasado, es pensar en su lucha por dejar atrás bombardeos y rencillas para disfrutar de las auténticas maravillas del ser humano que lo apasionaban como la música, el cine, la literatura o el arte. Humanista e intelectual sin límites, Ángel no dejó de estar al tanto de la vida cultural hasta casi sus 90 años y aún recientemente se emocionaba con pasajes de sus clásicos preferidos del cine americano con el que creció.

El Ángel que yo conocí era un maestro de la vida, cautivador, carismático, divertido, entusiasta, excelente contador de historias pero también buen oyente, tierno y cariñoso, discreto, vital, sacaba su carácter cuando se hacían bromas con temas serios (“hay temas de los que no se puede ser hablar con simpleza ni decir estupideces”, decía), podía ser un poco pillo a veces, y se mostraba tremendamente leal a los lazos de afecto y amistad que fue desarrollando en todas las etapas de su vida.

Ángel fue único en muchos sentidos y una gran parte de los que lo conocimos nos sentimos verdaderamente honrados de seguir aprendiendo de él, de haber sido una pequeñísima porción de su fructífera vida, y de tratar de continuar su legado como maestro y humanista.

En cierto modo, Ángel ha logrado trascender su propio yo y forma ya parte de esa intrahistoria firme, consistente y humilde que nos hace avanzar hacia un mundo mejor, esa galería de personajes imprescindibles que no tienen que salir en los libros pero que seguirán en nuestro mundo mientras los recordemos y sigamos su ejemplo. Eres muy grande, Ángel.

—Marta Escartín

*SYA Spain Language Teacher and  
SYA Summer Spain Program Director*

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Querido Ángel:

Han pasado muchos años desde nuestro primer encuentro en Rambla de Cataluña. No tuve la suerte de compartir docencia contigo pero las palabras hacia tí de admiración y cariño de Marisa Sainati , secretaria por aquel entonces de SYA, han cobrado significado y sentido durante todos los momentos compartidos estos años contigo.

Han cobrado significado cada vez que cada otoño, en un asamblea general con todos los estudiantes explicabas el horror de la guerra desde el sentimiento y tus recuerdos del abrazo de tu madre cuando caían las bombas en tu niñez .

Han cobrado sentido cuando te invitaba a mi clase y les explicabas a los chicos y chicas cómo era la personalidad creativa de Picasso no porque conocieses profundamente sus obras que también, sino por haber ido a visitarlo de manera espontánea a su casa de sur de Francia cuando pasabas por allí con tus amigos.

Pero esas primeras palabras de Marisa, han cobrado especialmente significado para mí cada vez que sentía tu calidez y cercanía al preguntarme con interés real por mi vida, mis hijos y especialmente por Jacobo.

No quiero decirte Adiós, hasta luego y ni siquiera hasta siempre. Quiero recordar solamente lo que te dije el pasado viernes cuando fui a visitarte: “ Sé que ayer te vinieron a ver Oriol y Marta. No sé si te dijeron que volvemos a abrir el colegio este septiembre con muchos estudiantes. Estamos deseando que vengas este otoño a visitarnos.”

Querido Ángel siempre estarás con nosotros.

—Soledad Gutiérrez  
*SYA Spain Art History Teacher*

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Ángel was simply one of a kind as a teacher. An autodidact, he was a gifted communicator who spoke passionately for what he believed in and for what he loved. He became a teacher, at age 37, almost by accident. Through a chance connection with Director Clark Vaughan, he agreed to help out Schoolboys Abroad in its maiden year, first in finding families, then in signing on as a part-time Spanish teacher, teaching one class a day to the twelve of us. Before long, Ángel became our principal window on all aspects of Spanish life, from etiquette at the Catalan dinner table to the brutalities of the Franco dictatorship. Many years later, he recalled that first year of teaching. “I had a choice to make,” he said. “I remember thinking I could be assisting this rich widow in planning her estate, or I could be introducing a band of bright-eyed American high school students to a new world. It was, really, an easy decision for me to make.” Ángel spent the next 34 years at SYA. I sat in on a class of his during his last year, also the school’s last in Barcelona. Over those many years, his passion, his conviction, and the palpable force of his teaching had not diminished one iota.

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Early on in our daily one-hour conversation class, Ángel was very much the explainer of daily life in Barcelona, of idiomatic expressions and useful phrases for us to try out in the world beyond the classroom. But Ángel was also part of a deadly serious Catalan community of artists, writers, and

intellectuals that stood in opposition to the Franco regime, and he had more to say, much more, beyond explaining a useful turn of phrase. So, as the year went by and our language skills improved, Ángel would share, almost daily, news from the opposition -- of underground printing presses, of songwriters and singers challenging the restraints of the dictatorship, of student protests, of opposition leaders jailed, or worse. In retrospect, it seems clear that Ángel did this at some personal risk to himself. We were privileged that he saw fit to make us aware of the brutal realities of the dictatorship. I was wild-eyed, captivated by it all, as were, I think, many of my classmates. No one, in any event, was unmoved.

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I probably have more vivid memories from my year in Barcelona than of any other year in my life. But one memory stands out, and by now it's an amalgam. I'm looking up, at a painting or a church tower, a *retablo* or a sculpture, and it's the Barrio Gotico, or Madrid, Toledo, or Burgos, and behind me I hear the voice of Ángel, explaining it all.

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Ángel's two passions were art and politics (and by politics I mean hatred of the Franco dictatorship and a yearning to live in a free and fair society). The two were not infrequently on the front burner simultaneously, as was the case one gray November day when Ángel took us to see Gaudi's Parque Guell. In the Hall of Columns, with the unusual slanted Doric columns, Ángel launched into an attack on the US treatment of Cuba and praised Fidel Castro. We were, to a boy, thunderstruck.

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Ángel was our guide on our Christmas vacation bus tour to Madrid and Northern Spain. Our route took us past the entrance to the Valley of the Fallen, Franco's grotesque monument to the civil war dead. Although we were by then all intrepid anti-Franquistas, some of us were nevertheless curious to see this site. But it was not on the itinerary, and we all knew why. As we passed by the entrance, Ángel, at the front of our little bus, looked unflinchingly straight ahead. Sitting behind him, we looked searchingly up the entrance road to the monument but remained silent.

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In 2005, a fund was established to support a scholarship in honor of Ángel. There has been an Ángel Vilalta Scholar in Spain every year since then.

In 2011, the faculty room at the new SYA schooling building in Zaragoza was named in honor of Ángel.

After his retirement, Ángel was invited each year to visit the school in Zaragoza and to address the students. He did so every year for 15 years until his declining health made travel too difficult. Each year on each visit, he invariably stole the show. Whatever problems beset the world, Ángel always professed his faith in youth to set things right.

—Stephen Foster ES'65

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Ángel Vilalta was a force of nature — passionate, inspirational, principled, and committed to teaching the young Americans who came so innocently to his classroom, even though he had been the victim of ethnic prejudice in Texas, well before our SYA inaugural class of 1965 arrived in Barcelona. Although many fine scholars taught me in U.S. educational institutions, Ángel was, hands down — or in his case, hands up, flailing like windmills to make his points — by far my most influential teacher. His interests ranged from the high points of Catalan cuisine and culture to the low points of the Franco dictatorship, which still held Catalunya in its grip during our SYA year. From Ángel I came to learn much, not only about Spain, but about the U.S. and the wider world. His inspirational lessons — humanity matters, values count, and hypocrisy must be challenged — launched my eventual career as an international human rights lawyer. I was fortunate to be able to see him in recent years during our class anniversaries in Barcelona and Zaragoza. By then, his first name had returned to its original pronunciation of Awn-jull, from the castilianized AN-*hell* he had adopted during Franco's era. When I told him how much he meant to me, tears came to his eyes. We embraced. I only regret that the pandemic prevented me from visiting him during his last year. As much as I valued the teacher, I loved the man.

—Doug Cassel ES'65 ES'11P

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1968 and 1969 were turbulent times, both in the U.S. and Europe. The Cold War was hot, Vietnam hotter. I arrived in Barcelona convinced the U.S. were the good guys. Then one day, Ángel said, “La CIA, el KGB, para nosotros son iguales!” At the time, my sixteen-year-old brain couldn't grasp the concept, but many times over the ensuing years, I have remembered his prophetic words. Ángel Vilalta hated Franco and fascism, but he loved Spain and Catalunya. He was an internationalist.

—Chris Vaughan ES'69

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Ángel taught us to be honest, to be on the right side of things, and to not take our privileges or freedoms for granted. He helped us recognize the life in art and literature, and to understand that to learn another language is to learn the soul of the country. But most of all, Ángel wanted us to feel. I think that's what made him stand above any other teacher I ever had. He loved us.

—Tom Dey ES'83

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In anticipation of the fiftieth-year anniversary of SYA in 2015, I had the unexpected pleasure of traveling to Barcelona with fellow ES'83 classmate Tom Dey to spend some time with Ángel Vilalta and, of course, to record his video acceptance speech for an award that he would be receiving in July of that year. It had been more than thirty years since I had last seen Ángel, and I was struck by how vibrant and full of life he seemed. I had been told Ángel was not well enough to make the long and difficult journey to Boston, but I would never have guessed that when he opened the old wooden door to his building. He welcomed us into his apartment, where he had lived most of his life, and it was as if we all instantly returned to the SYA building on Rambla Catalunya, smiling, speaking Spanish, answering his questions about former students.

Despite having endured the terrible reign of Franco, Ángel never turned his back on Spain or his beloved Barcelona. Part social historian and part intellectual, Ángel was fascinated by the human spirit. He was a fierce advocate of democracy, beauty — and ironically, fear — because he knew it was on the other side of fear that seventeen-year-old Americans would ultimately find growth, compassion, and the need to feel alive.

Ángel, I am certain you now are surrounded by joy, intelligence, decency, beauty, maybe even a little irreverence — all the things you so selflessly gave each and every one of us who made the unforgettable

journey to SYA. You will not be forgotten. You will forever be loved.

—Andrew Loo ES'83

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Ángel Vilalta's incredible enthusiasm for art and art history made looking at endless cathedrals fun for all. Señor Vilalta greeted us to class with a huge smile every day and made even learning grammar feel like an adventure. I will never forget the special twinkle in his eye and the dance in his step as he walked us through Barcelona, pointing out all of the amazing architecture and art surrounding us. As a wide-eyed sixteen year old in Barcelona, I fully understood that Señor Vilalta was opening the world to me. His endless joy for life and his whole-hearted embrace of new experiences inspired us all every day. As a teacher myself now, I continue to draw from his inspiration, and I will always deeply appreciate how much he impacted me and so many SYAers during his magical, unforgettable life.

—Courtney Monnich ES'90 ES'20P ES'22P

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***A dream Ángel had in 2015, as he recounted it to Andrew Loo ES'83:***

"All the people I love in this world, who I liked, many came to me. I saw all of them. I think it was like a dream. But I saw so many. And that is what I thought at that moment, what is sad about dying, you are not with the people you love. Because really, I don't know where but not with your people. Not in your place. I want to be here in Barcelona. Don't give me a strange place."