

SCHOOL YEAR ABROAD

THE NEWSLETTER OF SCHOOL YEAR ABROAD

PHILLIPS ACADEMY, ANDOVER, MA 01810

FALL 2001

SYA in a Historic Moment

by W.W. Halsey II, Executive Director

We had planned an upbeat Newsletter piece on SYA history in the making: the moment when, for the first time, not one, not two, not three, but four separate SYA groups would leave the United States from four separate airports bound for four distant cities and the beginning of the adventure that all of you who read these lines recall so well.

And, ultimately, our students did manage to travel to their destinations; but not before a much greater and infinitely sadder story had swept ours away, leaving us to assess our role in a new history and ponder our place in a changed and worried world.

Happily, our China and Italy groups had taken off for Beijing and Viterbo on routine flights at the beginning of September. They were safely ensconced in their host families when the terrorists struck. But the Spain and France contingents, scheduled to leave New York and Boston on September 11 and 12, found themselves stuck at home or, in some cases, stranded.

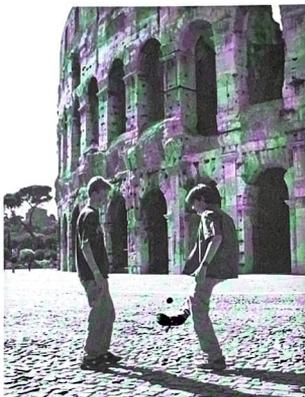
Some students and their parents waited it out in hotels. Some ended driving back home — as far as Chicago in one case — to try again a week later. A few spent more than a week in Manhattan with a remarkable SYA family, who not only gave them shelter but also supported them as they did what they could to help the rescuers at the World Trade Center. [See article.]

As everyone else did that terrible week, we watched and listened nonstop to the constant flow of news, checked the airline and airport Web sites every hour, maintained e-mail and telephone contact with our 124 expectant students, hoping against hope that we would be able to fly them safely to Europe before too many days passed.

And we did. Thanks to the efforts of our Cambridge-based travel agency who nimbly switched reservations on the morning of departure when our Madrid flight was canceled, the Spain group managed to travel to Zaragoza via Barcelona just eight days later than planned. And the France group made it on a flight to Paris three days after them.



Getting acquainted with Rennes.



Italy provides a dramatic backdrop for a familiar game.

In a remarkable show of solidarity and commitment, 121 students made the journey to Europe. Only three of 124 had a change of heart in the wake of the terrorist attacks.

After the students left, I wrote their parents to express our appreciation for their steadfastness and our confidence that their children would remain safe. It's a message I would like to share with you:

"I am sorry that the unprecedented circumstances of recent days forced us to cancel our traditional send-off meeting with parents and students at the airport. Had we been able to meet, I would have emphasized two things:

"1) All of us at SYA deeply appreciate your faith in us and in the important project we have undertaken together.

"2) All of us at SYA agree that assuring the safety and well-being of your children is our most important responsibility.

"The horrible events of last week have taught us that we cannot assume the absence of danger anywhere in the world. No place is 100 percent safe. Violence, whether willed or accidental, can strike us no matter where we are. That is a sobering thought. On the other hand, we are happy to know that our students are as safe in SYA's four far-flung sites as they would be back home, probably safer than in big cities in the United States which must now be considered potential targets of terrorist attacks.

"We have always made every effort to blend in to the cultures of the cities who host us. We do not field athletic teams or offer SYA extracurricular activities because we want our students to join local teams and

From the Ruins of Devastation, Hope Breaks Through

by Edwin Gragert and Patricia Kozu, parents of Alisa Gragert 502

The day began with so much excitement and anticipation. Finally, the countdown on the calendar had reached Day 0! What joy for a 15-year-old about to begin a school year abroad! And, then...

SEPTEMBER 11 WILL NEVER BE FORGOTTEN

An 8:50 a.m. call from Pat at work to Alisa and Ed packing at home: "Turn on the television. Something awful has happened." The bad news just kept getting worse by the minute. Another plane. Another building. Another city. Buildings collapsing. And more.

We were riveted to the television in disbelief. Ed and Alisa had to go to our apartment's roof to verify that it was indeed true. Pat had seen the smoke on her way home from the office.

REACHING OUT

When the numbness began to recede, we needed to find ways to help. The hospitals couldn't handle all the blood donors. The relief agencies were turning away volunteers. So, we looked closer to home. What about the SYAers and their families stranded in a strange city during a very scary time?



Ed Gragert and Pat Kozu with Alisa at SYA Spain departure from JFK airport on September 19.

It became our pleasure to house a few of them until air traffic resumed and a new flight could be arranged. We also met and brought together other stranded students and families in the area for lunch, dinner, dessert, or just to meet. It was so helpful to get to know each other and share thoughts, perspectives and ideas.

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local clubs. We want them to spend time with new friends from their new home, not members of their SYA group. We tell our students it is up to them to adapt to the ways of their host family, not vice versa. We have never wanted to draw attention to ourselves; that is not the point of living, working and studying in another culture. We do not even post an SYA sign on our buildings.

"Each year we teach our students how to be careful in the street, blending in, maintaining awareness of their belongings and their surroundings, staying away from areas that may be dangerous, and avoiding stores or restaurants that might be perceived as particularly 'American.' This year's orientation lessons will be especially pointed, and I know our students will take them especially seriously.

"Though an individual or group could always decide to harm us, we believe that the policies we have always pursued for cultural and educational reasons will help keep our students invisible and safe.

"I know it is difficult to watch your child walk through security and take significant steps towards independence and adulthood. I know because I have watched countless SYA students and three of my own children take those same steps. It's hard for those of us left behind. But, more than ever, it is important that we help our children understand the world beyond our shores and help that world, through our children, to understand us."

We thank all of you for helping us make our small contribution to understanding, to compassion and to peace. ☺



New SYAers at home in Zaragoza.

HOPE (cont. from p.1)

SYAERS' VOLUNTEER EFFORTS

The students were terrific. We had encouraged them to go outside to get a break from the unending television images: "Go for a walk. Check out Columbia University. Go to Central Park." A little later we got a phone call from them: "We just didn't feel like going to the Park. We saw a sign asking for volunteers at a neighborhood church. We're going there."

During the week, they sorted clothes for the displaced families; bought supplies with their own money for the rescue workers; put together amenities packages for workers; served food to the emergency crews, and lit candles at impromptu memorials at Union Square. One night with some other SYAers who were in the area, they baked cookies, brownies and cupcakes. The next morning they stood on Broadway for five hours selling their baked goods, raising \$200 for the relief efforts.

MOVING ON

At the end of each day, they got their books out to review Spanish grammar. They exchanged e-mails with an SYAer already in Spain — how he wished he were here; how they wished they were there. They e-mailed to an SYAer already in China — what a different experience she was having. They commiserated with an SYAer waiting to go to France.

Their world, which had suddenly blown up, began to pull together again. New bonds were created. New friendships were forged. New directions were in sight. The students are starting the year with incredible focus; the parents have established an e-mail list serve and are continuing a dialogue — all of us building in different ways on a shared tragedy. ☺

Better to Travel 10,000 Miles Than to Read 10,000 Volumes

The following is an excerpt from Dr. Bissell's report to China parents, January 2001

Dear SYA Parents,

In my first year of graduate school in the United States I had a Chinese professor who complained to me once that in academia formal scholarship took precedence over true learning. As a neophyte trying desperately to make sense of the rules in graduate education and wanting so much to fit in, I found his comment both reassuring and troubling.

On the one hand I felt comforted, for it was the first time I had heard anyone in the academy cast doubt on the abstruse world of scholarly journals and conferences. Yet it was also unsettling; why was I spending hours a day, cloistered in a reading room as the world went on, unconcerned with the esoteric issues that demanded most of my time and attention? As luck would have it, my graduate research took me to China and Taiwan with my family for an extended period of time. Looking back, it is clear to me that the greatest rewards from the time we spent in Asia came outside of the library and classroom.

In light of this experience, the traditional epigraph in the title has become for me almost a mantra — the ideal prescription for the path one must follow to become a truly learned person. I no longer remember who first wrote it for me, but it strikes me as the embodiment of the type of experience we are trying to create for our students in China.

While they spend hours a day in rigorous classes, it is ultimately the learning that is taking place outside the



China Resident Director Jeffrey Bissell and LeeAnn with their two children, Jillian and Joe, at the three pagodas in Dali, Yunnan Province, in southwest China.

classroom that will distinguish the education they receive here. Of course in-class and out-of-class learning need not be mutually exclusive. We have tried to create a curriculum that will help them understand their adopted country. Yet without the in-country experience — the travel, the explorations of Beijing's streets and alleys, the time spent with host family — the education would be only partial. ☺

Chance Encounter in Brácana

by Paul Karoff S75

In February I returned to Spain for a too-brief vacation with my wife and two teenage daughters, my first time in Spain since 1976. We were without itinerary and had a wonderful week traveling through Andalusia in a rented car.

Twenty-five years ago, after my year with SYA ended, I spent the summer working in a Costa Brava hotel rather than returning home. There I befriended a host of colorful characters, including a young wanderer named Paco. A year later, after high school, I returned for another year and ran into Paco on the Ramblas in Barcelona. We spent the next nine months traveling together, mostly as migrant farm workers in the south, including a few months in the village outside of Granada from which his family had fled for the city years earlier.

This trip, I was determined to find that hamlet to see if it was as I remembered it. After driving through 30 kilometers of endless olive groves — and nothing else — and being stopped by a hapless and bemused crew of *Guardia Civil*, we pulled into the town of Brácana, population 200. Very little had changed, although more of the whitewashed homes had electricity and running water than in the mid-70's. It was late morning, and we stepped into the bar for a coffee where I inquired about my friend Paco.

To my amazement, I learned he had moved back to the town a year earlier. The barkeeper called down the unpaved street to a woman on a stoop, who turned out to be Paco's wife. She had heard many stories and urged me to stay and wait for Paco to return from the olive groves. But that wouldn't happen until late afternoon.

So we jumped in the car and started down a dirt road in search of the olive-harvesting crew. We found them.

After nearly 25 years without contact, Paco emerged from behind an ancient tree. The encounter was a shock for both of us. He promptly knocked off for the day, and we returned to his house and enjoyed stories over homemade wine. It was absolutely the highlight of the trip for me, and perhaps for my family as well. Spain has changed in 25 years, but more than that, it has stayed the same. ☺



Paul Karoff (center) with his daughters and Paco and Maria Leyva in the olive groves.

Paul lives in Hingham, MA with his wife, Linda, and daughters, Claire (16) and Maggie (14). He is vice president for university affairs at Lesley University in Cambridge.

Mid-Life Revelation: Be Afraid and Do It Anyway

by Linda Callahan S75

This piece is about a journey I took before the events of September 11 altered the world view. It seems incongruous to submit a story that doesn't directly address the continuing tragedy. Before beginning, therefore, I'd like to say that I am sorry for any personal losses that members of the extended SYA family may be suffering, as well as for the general trauma and sadness. I wish you peace and protection.

Last year I had a mid-life revelation. Actually, it looked a lot like a mid-life crisis until inspiration caught me off guard. I had recently seen a terrific story in this newsletter about SYA China's winter trip. The accompanying photos showed SYA students riding horseback across a vast plain and breakfasting around the fire with a Mongolian family. I was captivated. It brought back the sense of adventure, discovery and engagement with people different from ourselves that we had experienced in Europe in 1975 with SYA.

Soon after, as I was charging through another day, juggling some new project into the mix, there was this moment of clarity. I recognized suddenly that if I wished to live with intention into the future, I ought to start paying attention to what I was doing right now. Wouldn't it be great to carve out a chunk of time to follow my inclination and see where I ended up? And if not now, when? I figured I'd need at least a year.

The first thing I noticed was that this was a scary idea. After all, I had spent the last couple of decades constructing a pretty safe and comfortable life. There were currents of anxiety about letting go of a regular paycheck, leaving friends and family to travel alone in unfamiliar places, and about, say, falling off a cliff in a remote wilderness. It was very reinforcing that almost everyone on whom I tested the idea crumpled a little and exclaimed: "What a great idea! I wish I had the time

(or money, or freedom, or courage, etc.) to do that!" OK, I thought, this is clearly the right thing to do. Be afraid and do it anyway.

I resisted the temptation to construct a definite plan. The time was to bump into new possibilities and have the freedom to engage. So I declared myself on personal sabbatical, leased my apartment, borrowed a backpack, and bought an around-the-world ticket. Looking back, the journey included several amazing months traveling and trekking in India, Nepal and Thailand; exquisite time with old and new friends in Asia, the Caribbean and the northeast United States; and an incredible sea-kayaking adventure in Prince William Sound, Alaska. In retrospect, it was absolutely the right thing to do.



Linda with bicycle rickshaw drivers in Khajuraho, India.

There were many moments when every single thing in view was astonishing and new. One November morning in the holy Indian city of Banares, there was a pre-dawn boat ride on the Ganges. The riverbanks were alive with vividly colorful saris and robes, smoky fires and incense, and blaring Hindi music as thousands of pilgrims crowded down to wash away their sins in the sacred waters. For two weeks in December, I crawled out of a pup tent into magnificent terrain while trekking the Himalayas in central Nepal. In February, there was a gorgeous solitary sunrise on Sumai Island, Thailand when a coconut thudded to the ground a few yards away. Later, there were mornings in Alaska, while packing a kayak under snow-capped mountains, when room-sized chunks of glacier thundered into the bay. It was deeply enlivening to take the time to be surprised and delighted by the world.

Away from home, there were also endless opportunities to engage with people I would not have



Village in the Annapurna Range of Nepal.

met in my ordinary day to day. I still see Akbar jugging his bicycle rickshaw through the impossibly crowded labyrinth of Old Delhi. I got an e-mail yesterday from Mani Lal, who at 16 walked out of the Himalayas for four days to the nearest city because he wanted to see the world. And I'm looking forward to a visit from Suzi who, over Christmas dinner, told a gathering of new friends what it was like to be a young East German in the time before the Berlin Wall came down. The world is much bigger than I realized, and I am now more open to engage with the people who inhabit it.

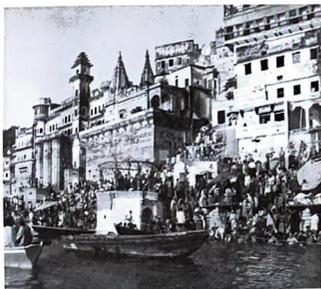
Probably the greatest rewards came out of facing fear and walking through situations that were not perfectly comfortable or secure. I learned that I was capable of, and I also found my limits. There were days sequestered in a guesthouse when violent riots rocked Kathmandu, and I learned how deeply people bond in times of extreme crisis. I expedited for the first time in remote areas, sometimes a two-day run from the nearest telephone and discovered that I have stamina and strength and that I'm wild about the wilderness. And, having bumped up against the deprivation that people suffer in the poorest places, I'm more conscious of my privilege and the responsibility it conveys. It turns out that it's sometimes worth taking a calculated risk just for the sake of raising one's bar.

It's wonderful to be home again, yet it feels like I'm just getting started. The sense of adventure and discovery remains, just as it did at the end of that SYA year 25 years ago. I feel rejuvenated, wiser, braver and more willing to take risks to create possibility. I'm looking forward to pursuing the passions and ideas that had space to stretch out during this time off. Of course, I'll have to learn to linger intentionally in my day to day. And there are so many new threads to follow; I guess I'll need at least a year. ☒

Linda is a focus group moderator and newly wild outdoorswoman living in Cambridge, MA.



Sea-kayaking in Prince William Sound, Alaska.



Along the River Ganges in Banares, India.

Dear Alumni, Alumnae, Parents, Faculty and Friends,

We acknowledge how deeply the SYA family has been affected since the attack of September 11, 2001, and we realize that many of you have suffered the loss of loved ones. Our thoughts and prayers go out to you.

At this time, we know of no casualties within the SYA family itself. Many class correspondents have contacted us to report that there were no victims among their classmates in New York, Washington and Pennsylvania. Because there are so many SYA alumni/ae, parents and friends living and working in these greater metropolitan areas, I'm hoping you, too, will take an active part in verifying that your fellow SYAers are all safe and accounted for.

I encourage each of you to phone, e-mail, or post your updates and comments on the SYA Alumni Update page [www.sya.org/alumni_update.html] throughout the year. You can contact me at alumni@sya.org to request your class address list.

On behalf of all of us at SYA, I send our best wishes to you and your families.

Carolyn Morahan

Carolyn Morahan
Alumni Director

Letters of Support from Rennes

by France Resident Director Donald Austin

As drawn out as our departure was amid the horrible events of mid-September, our actual trip to Rennes happened without incident. The determination of our students, parents, teachers and host families to persevere in the face of uncertainty is admirable, and I believe that the spirit of this class and this year will ultimately be strengthened by our collective resolve to go forward as originally planned. The mere presence in Rennes of the entire class represents a triumph, and I fully expect that we will all be especially conscious of this year's special opportunities and more apt to seize them.

Here we share with you a sampling of the numerous notes we received in the weeks following the attacks on the United States. They arrived from current and former host families, people who have worked for the school, neighbors and friends. Many were hand-delivered hours after the attacks. Together they represent a moving testimony of the support and affection we enjoy from the Rennes community.

I. M. Austin, directeur,

La tragédie qui vient de frapper les Etats-Unis nous concerne tous. Je veux vous assurer, en ces moments douloureux, de notre amitié, notre mobilisation, et notre solidarité, à vous à toute votre équipe pédagogique, et aux élèves à qui je pense si fort.

The tragedy, which has struck the United States, concerns us all. I would like to assure you, in these sad times, of our friendship, our mobilization and our solidarity to you and to your entire teaching staff, and to the students of whom I think so strongly.

II. Monsieur le Directeur,

Face aux récents événements qui ont touché les U.S.A., je veux vous dire toute ma sympathie (au sens propre du terme: «souffrir avec»). Ces dernières années j'ai accueilli à diverses reprises de jeunes étudiants américains pour une année d'études à Rennes... il y a tout juste un an, l'un de mes jeunes fils épousait une jeune Américaine. Je suis profondément blessée par cette tragédie et je partage la souffrance du peuple américain.



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The School Year Abroad Newsletter is a chronicle of the personal and professional achievements of our alumni and friends. We rely on your news, photographs and suggestions for articles to broaden the scope of this publication. And we encourage you to contribute often. Please send your contributions to School Year Abroad, Phillips Academy, Andover, MA 01810, fax to 978-725-6833 or e-mail to mail@sia.org. Visit our website at www.sia.org.



We would like to recognize Steve Mirarchi as the photographer of Italy Resident Director Jeff Bradley and wife, Kathryn, on the cover of the Spring/Summer 2001 edition of The Newsletter of School Year Abroad.

In the face of current events which have touched the U.S.A., I want to tell you how sorry I am. These last years I have welcomed several young American students for a year of study in Rennes... It was just a year ago that one of my young sons married a young American girl. I am deeply hurt by this tragedy, and I share the suffering of the American people.

III. Comme tous les Français, nous nous associons à la douleur des familles américaines qui a frappé les Etats-Unis ces derniers jours. Nous y sommes d'autant plus sensibles que nous avons, par l'intermédiaire de SYA ces dernières années, trouvé des familles qui sont chères à nos cœurs, grâce à nos filles américaines. A tout moment nous nous tenons à votre entière disposition.

Like all French people, we identify with the sadness which has hit the American families in the last few days. We are all the more sensitive since we have, by way of SYA over these last years, found families who are very dear to our hearts, thanks to our American daughters. At any time we are here to help you.

IV. Chers voisins, chers amis,

Après ce terrible drame qui frappe votre pays, votre peuple, nous tenons à toute votre équipe et notre solidarité.

Dear neighbors, dear friends,

After the terrible drama which is striking your country, your people, we share with you our sympathy and our solidarity.

V. Cher Monsieur Austin,

Il y a tout juste un an, nous accueillions notre fille américaine et faisons connaissance avec votre école. Ce fut une année enrichissante et heureuse à cause des nombreux contacts créés par la présence de ces étudiants. Nous aurions aimé être plus solidaires et vous manifester notre amitié au cours de ces événements terribles. Nous tenons à vous assurer que, bien que absents momentanément de vos familles d'accueil, nous conservons notre amitié et notre soutien à votre équipe, vos étudiants, et à vous-même.

It was just a year ago that we welcomed our SYA daughter and became involved with your school. It was an enriching and happy year because of the many contacts made by the presence of these students. We want to show our support and affirm our friendship in the course of these terrible events. We want to assure you that despite our momentary absence from your group of host families, we remain your friends and support your team, your students and you.

VI. Monsieur le Directeur et cher collègue,

Nous avons été bouleversés, comme le monde entier l'a été, par les terribles attentats qui ont frappé les USA—et la démocratie—en plein cœur. Permettez-moi de nous associer à votre douleur et d'exprimer notre profonde solidarité à votre communauté scolaire. Le lycée Jean Macé tout entier a participé aux 3 minutes de silence décrétées par le Conseil des Ministres de l'Union Européenne: 1300 personnes, élèves et personnel, rassemblés dans la cour, se sont recueillis à ce moment-là dans l'émotion et la dignité. Nous renouvelant toute ma sympathie, je vous prie d'agréer, Monsieur le Directeur et cher collègue, l'expression de mes sentiments les plus cordiaux.

We are horrified, along with the entire world, by the terrible events which have hit the U.S.A.—and democracy. Permit me to share your sorrow and to express our staunch support of your academic community. The entire Lycée Jean Macé participated in three minutes of silence decreed by the Council of Ministers of the European Union: 1300 people, students and staff, assembled in the courtyard, were reunited in that moment in emotion and dignity. You have all my support and sympathy, Mr. Director and dear colleague.

VII. Monsieur et Madame Austin,

Bien tristement, en ces heures d'affliction, nous témoignons notre sympathie à l'ensemble de vos élèves et



"Although we accelerated the orientation process, the year began routinely in Rennes. We had several orientation meetings on our first two days in Rennes, and we sent pairs of students into the city on a treasure hunt designed to introduce the students to key landmarks before launching into our first full day of classes and normal operations." — Don Austin

à vous-mêmes. Meurtris dans l'âme, notre personnel, toute ma famille ainsi que moi-même, nous vous adressons l'expression de nos sentiments attristés.

With great sadness, in this time of suffering, we extend our sympathy to you and your students. It is with an aching heart that our staff and all my family offer our heartfelt sentiments in this time of sorrow.

VIII. Nous électriciens et notre personnel sont dans votre douleur la plus profonde, pour l'événement mondiale qui se produit actuellement aux Etats-Unis. Sachez que nous vous soutenons.

We electricians and our staff share in the pain and sadness you suffered from the world-wide event which occurred in the United States. Please know that we support you.

IX. Après les attentats de la semaine dernière je voudrais transmettre au peuple américain toute ma compassion et l'assurer de notre amitié. "Mère française" pendant 13 ans..., j'ai gardé des liens très forts avec quelques élèves et leurs parents. La richesse de ces liens est un gage de paix pour l'avenir. A vos élèves actuels de savoir les relier.

After the attacks of last week, I would like to communicate to the American people my compassion and the depth of our friendship. A "French mother" for 13 years..., I have kept strong ties with several students and their parents. The richness of these ties is a pledge of peace for the future. It is up to your current students to create those enduring relationships. ☒



Josie Rodriguez and Mike Blum ready to start their year.

Living the Language of the Gods

by Alex Wolfe S79

Victor kept his teddy bear on the nightstand beside his bed. Behind it on the wall was a swastika, a framed photograph of Hitler and a poster of the red-and-yellow-striped Spanish flag with the motto of the *Falange Español* at the bottom: "For God, Family, and Fatherland." Victor was my Spanish brother.

My host family was a broken family — a divorced housewife with 17-year-old fraternal twins — and poor. The flat was a small, basement apartment near the Calle Balmes metro stop. Victor's gang of teenage ruffians

sprawled across the overstuffed sofa. There was always a lot of shouting going on about something, usually politics. It didn't help that I was a self-styled radical reading books with suspicious-sounding titles. Kitchenware often sailed back and forth across the room; but Victor was a good guy apart from being a fascist, and there was a lot more love than hate. Besides, it was Barcelona, 1978.



Alex Wolfe

The streets were exploding with all the politics and culture that had been bottled up during 40 years of Franco's dictatorship. The mysterious new King Juan Carlos seemed to really want democracy for the country. The new constitution was about to be ratified, but there were still machine-gun-carrying *Guardia Civil* in their three-cornered hats on every corner of the Ramblas. Victor and his friends would take me out to concerts at the stadium. None of us had any money. It didn't matter. Nobody ever paid. The *guardias* would post themselves in front of the gates, but there were many gates around the building and only so many *guardias*. The mobs of teenagers would swarm and retreat, sometimes creating a diversionary disturbance to distract the authorities while another pack of delinquents rushed an unguarded door around the corner, rocking the metal frame, shattering panes of glass, until the padlocked chains would snap and everyone stormed in. It usually didn't work the first time, and the *guardias* would shoot rubber bullets at us; but we were persistent.

Learning to attain one's goals is an important lesson in life, but sometimes a boy just needs to be alone. I'd get 100 grams of *manchego* cheese, a tomato and some bread at the *mercado* and sit in the Plaza Cataluna watching the girls or the pigeons and mulling over Sr. Vilalta's enchanting words about Velazquez or anarchism. Later I would go to the *Filmoteca Nacional* in the Barrio Chino where I could see four films for about 50 cents. The place was sheer bliss, showing everything from Russ Meyers to Kurosawa and, of course, a wealth of great Spanish cinema. I hope it's still there.

My school year abroad eventually came to an end. Other school years followed at Columbia, Berkeley and NYU Film School. For a while I worked as a criminal defense investigator with the Federal Public Defenders Office in the southern district of California. My friends in Tijuana taught me a lot of new Spanish words. I learned other words in other places: Puerto Rican Spanish, Dominican Spanish, Cuban Spanish, Colombian Spanish, Tico Spanish. The language seems to continually reinvent itself. When Victor Hugo was asked why he was learning Spanish so late in his life and despite knowing four or five other languages, he said, "Spanish is the language of the gods." When you're Victor Hugo, you can say things like that.

I can't imagine not speaking Spanish now. It has been a determinant force in my life since my teens. I have been making films for 20 years now, and most of my work deals with Latin America and Latin Americans.

Last year I produced a piece for public television on the *décima* tradition in Puerto Rico. *Décima* is an ancient Spanish form of octosyllabic poetry comprised of five-line rhyming couplets, which are palindromes. In other words, the first verse is a mirror image of the second verse in terms of the rhyme scheme. *Décima* can be written, recited, or, what is considered the ultimate form of the art, improvised in a song. In some mysterious way this form of poetry aligns itself with the biorhythms of life and language. It has thrived throughout Latin America, especially in the Caribbean, often among very poor people who can't even read or write but have no trouble improvising flourishes of perfectly rhyming verses on a given theme. I heard about a legendary old fellow in the Cuban *llanos* who only speaks in *décima*. Day in, day out, he walks around speaking in octosyllabic-rhyming, ten-verse palindromes.

The *décima* tradition still exists in Spain, I am told; and Victor Hugo must have heard some *campesinos* improvising on one of his trips. My Spanish is fluent, but I can only dream of being a *trovador*, a *décima* improviser. And I do.

Now my life is *Bachata*. I am finishing a feature documentary called, "Santo Domingo Blues: The Story of Luis Vargas, the Supreme King of Bitterness." The *bachateros* are a breed of guitar-playing singer/songwriters from the lowest sectors of Dominican society. Only recently did *Bachata* music begin to gain a broader appeal and limited acceptance with middle and upper class Dominican audiences. In lyrics heavy with sexual innuendo, double entendres and outright bawdiness, *bachateros* address themes of Everyman,



Bachatero Luis Vargas (center, on guitar) and his band performing in Brooklyn, NY.

singing comically exaggerated tales of ruined romances and unrequited love, of barroom camaraderie and maudlin drunken escapades. In recent years, *Bachata* has found a new appeal as its best interpreters have written songs with a hard urban edge.

The *bachateros* carry inside them the stigma their music had until only a few years ago. They are still embarrassed about it in some way, while at the same time being proud of how far they have come from their humble origins. It was very difficult to gain their trust and enter their world with a camera. Speaking their language was, of course, essential. Even more important was my love for the music and the culture it grew in, a love affair that started back in 1978, in Spain. It has shaped the course of my life more than I could have ever dreamed. ☒

Alex lives in Brooklyn, NY and continues to make documentaries and narrative films, often with Latin American themes. You may contact him at mambomedia@yahoo.com.

The First Class of Italy SYAers Arrived in Viterbo on September 2nd.

Photos capture the students' first hours at orientation and with their host families.

