

Mi Vida Venezolana (My Venezuelan Life)

By Shawn Biggs (senior, media studies and international politics)

“What the heck did I get myself into?”

That was the exact thought in my head as the airplane descended over mountains painted with slums and shacks into Simon Bolívar International Airport outside of Caracas. In about 10 hours, I would be in my new home for the next three and a half months.

My new home was Mérida, a city located in the western part of Venezuela. A city of more than 300,000 people, it is densely packed into the Andes Mountains. While it is not as large as the country’s capital city, Caracas, Mérida’s size makes it a major city in the Venezuelan Andean region. Although Venezuela is located in the tropics, the high altitude of this city in the mountains provided us with temperatures that were significantly lower than the rest of the country. During the day, the temperature was usually in the high 80s, while late at night and early in the morning the temperature could reach as low as the 50s.



A viaduct in the center of downtown Mérida

In Mérida, I lived in a homestay with a couple whose three children were in their late 20s and early 30s and no longer lived at home. My host mother spoke no English and my host father, who worked for an airline at the city’s airport, knew a few brief conversational phrases (“Hello!” “Good morning!”), but used them sporadically. We only spoke Spanish together. There was also a fourth member in the household, my American roommate. Many study abroad programs that have homestay options typically assign one American student with a family; however, our program provided us with the option of living with a roommate. I really appreciated having someone there to talk to in my native language, especially when going through the stressful first few days of adjusting to the new culture. We shared a room, which became our bubble of English, but outside of the room when we were with our host parents, we communicated to each other in Spanish.

Around 7:00 a.m. every morning, my roommate and I would get up to eat a small breakfast, which usually consisted of either Corn Flakes or an arepa (a flat, grilled patty

made of corn or flour that we would usually fill with egg, meat, or another other food that was on our plate). Venezuelans typically eat a small breakfast and dinner and a large lunch, so I quickly became accustomed to limited breakfast options. After breakfast, we would leave the apartment and make our way up to the trolley bus stop that would take us into town to our school.



The view from my family's apartment in Mérida

Foreign study programs vary in the types of institutions they send their students to. Some enroll in public universities in their city while others are taught at special schools owned by the education abroad company. I had neither of these. I had VEN-USA.

VEN-USA Institute of Modern Languages and International Studies was a small English language learning center that doubled as a place for Anglophone American students to take various Spanish-taught courses for their foreign studies. I think most of the students on my trip expected VEN-USA to be similar to the universities we were accustomed to in the States. In fact, upon seeing the interior of the school most of us just assumed—after seeing a pool table, a ping-pong table, a big-screen television, and hammocks hanging from the ceiling—that we were only just standing in the school's recreation center. That was until a staff member walked up to us and said, "Your classes will be held upstairs."

VEN-USA, being the only place where we had access to wireless Internet quickly became the center of not only our academic lives, but our social lives as well. Because the students of our program resided in homestays that were scattered around the city, VEN-USA provided us with a central location where we could meet. Our school also made it much easier for us to meet Venezuelans who were around our age. Many of the students who were learning English at VEN-USA were also students at The University of the Andes, the university in Mérida and one of the largest in the country.

At the institute I enrolled in courses in Venezuelan geography and history, and Latin American civilization and culture, however, after experiencing a frustrating culture shock with some administrative aspects of the institute, I soon wrongly convinced myself that the only reason the American students were there was for the benefit of the Venezuelans learning English. I was so sure of this fact that one day I decided to write my study abroad

advisor a long e-mail expressing my frustrations about the institute. She promptly returned an e-mail stating that she was happy I was adjusting to the culture. That is actually one of the things I miss about Venezuela the most—being emerged into a completely foreign culture and experiencing frustrations and challenges to your comfort zone.



Outside of VEN-USA Institute of Modern Languages and International Studies

I loved nearly every aspect of my study abroad opportunity; however, if I could change one aspect of my trip, I would have spent more time traveling to larger cities and exploring the country. At our school, we only had classes Monday through Thursday, so the school's staff encouraged us to go on trips to the mountains or the beach. My only issue was that I was so focused on improving my Spanish that I chose not to go camping in the mountains with a bunch of English-speaking *gringos* that I saw every day. I ended up spending most of my weekends exploring the city and spending time with my new Venezuelan friends. In fact, one of my biggest personal accomplishments was traveling by bus through the Andes with a friend to his hometown of Trujillo (a town a few hours north of Merida) and then back through the Andes alone on my return trip. I also went on an amazing trip with several other American students on a 12-hour bus ride north to the towns of Coro and Chichiriviche to visit the beach and see some of Venezuela's phenomenal sand dunes.



Traveling through the Andes Mountains



Los Médanos: sand dunes located outside of Coro, Venezuela

After nearly four months of being in South America, I was excited to finally get back to the U.S., but I would greatly miss all of the people I met and all of the experiences I was so fortunate to have. Venezuela was a great learning experience for me. It not only improved my skills in a foreign language, but it taught me to be more tolerant of cultural differences, and ignited a new passion for exploring and investigating new places. As I ascended back into the air over Simon Bolívar Airport on my way back to Miami, I no longer nervously thought to myself, "what the heck did I get myself into?" but instead commended myself for overcoming fear, breaking through nerves, and gaining knowledge of a country with a unique and vibrant culture.

Shawn Biggs is in his final semester at Penn State and is graduating with hopes of attending grad school and exploring more countries around the world. While in Venezuela, he kept a blog of some of his experiences, which is at <http://vzlavida.blogspot.com/>

Rundown of FastStart Events

The Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Day of Service

By Jasmine Plummer (sophomore, biobehavioral health)

The MLK Day of Service was Jan. 19, 2009. This year, FastStart had about 20 members participate, which included advisory board members, upperclassmen, and first-year students. The morning of the Day of Service started off with a breakfast—volunteering takes a lot of energy—so a good meal was important. After eating, we decided who would go where since there were many participants in attendance. We had the opportunity to split up and do work at three different sites. A few people stayed in Heritage Hall and made Meals on Wheels bags. Another group of people helped out with The Second Mile. Lastly, the group I was in went to Brookline Senior Living Center. While at the center, we got to participate in various activities and talk with and get to know the seniors who live there. We started off our service with a little bit of physical conditioning. We helped lead the seniors in stretches to warm up their muscles for other activities like balloon tossing and bowling. All in all, the day was a great success. We all got to serve the community in various ways, and celebrate the great life and deeds of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in the process.

Ice Cream and Networking Social

By Unique Parker (junior, journalism)

FastStart had its annual Ice Cream and Networking Social on March 22, 2009 in the Paul Robeson Cultural Center. Students and mentors received tips on networking with different types of people in different settings. They were given the definition of networking and the importance of it. Students were told that there are different types of situations to network in, including face-to-face. Face-to-face networking involves networking mixers, class events, and social events. Students were told to follow up with the people they networked with by using useful programs, such as LionLink:

<http://www.alumni.psu.edu/career/networking/default.htm>.

LionLink is a program designed to help Penn State students and alumni make professional networking connections. Students were also given seven networking tips: smile, listen, make eye contact, observe body language, avoid being pushy, give genuine compliments, and have business cards handy to pass out.

Ice Skating Party 2009

By Unique Parker (junior, journalism)

This past Valentine's Day, FastStart hosted its annual Ice Skating Party at the Greenberg Indoor Sports Complex on campus. The ice skating party took place during the Ice Rink's open session from 8:00–10:00 p.m. We provided students with free admission, skate rentals, a choice of hot chocolate or cappuccino, and all the pizza and snacks they could eat. The ice was cold but that did not prevent students from staying out on the ice. For most students, this was their first time ice skating, so some were hesitant, but all the students tried skating. This was FastStart's most successful ice skating party ever, attended by more than 60 students and mentors. We will continue to have an evening skating party because of our large turnout.



FastStart's Spring Celebration 2009

By Unique Parker (junior, journalism)

FastStart had its annual spring celebration at the Hintz Family Alumni Center on April 14, 2009. The celebration acknowledged and congratulated all graduating seniors, first-year students, and mentors for their accomplishments and support, and the Student Leadership Board for all of its hard work during the year. There were nine seniors who were acknowledged and presented with parting gifts and a certificate of completion for graduating



from Penn State as students from diverse backgrounds and for taking advantage of a program like the FastStart mentoring program. Most of the seniors are continuing their education or have found jobs in their chosen field. One graduating senior talked about her experience at Penn State as a student of color and how FastStart helped her survive her time at Penn State. The celebration was also a chance for students and mentors to network with each other for the last time before the end of the semester. Food and refreshments were served at the celebration.

Of the students who are graduating, we had three students who served FastStart with their ideas, time, and energy. Chanell Autrey, Hanim Lim, and Shawn Biggs all served on the FastStart Student Leadership Board after having been matched with mentors their first year. All the graduating seniors who could attend the Spring Celebration provided us with short bios:



Chanell Autrey: Channel is graduating with a bachelor's degree in Political Science, French, and International Studies. She will be attending George Washington University Law School in the fall as a George Washington Law Merit Scholar. She said that she has had some really wonderful teachers and mentors who encouraged her to follow my dreams to become a lawyer. Chanell is grateful to FastStart to helping her acclimate to life at Penn State and it made her transition much easier.

Shawn Biggs: is graduating with a bachelor's degree in Media Studies and International Politics, with a minor in Spanish. His plans to go grad school or law school and will use this summer to study for the standardized tests. He feels that these years at Penn State have helped him develop as a person and is grateful of the many experiences, including serving on the FastStart Student Leadership Board and a semester abroad in Venezuela.

Hanim Lim: Hanim is graduating with a bachelor's degree in Chemical Engineering. She will be working in Allentown with Air Products after graduation.

Cristen Adams: Cristen is graduating with a bachelor's degree in science-life science. She hopes to continue at Penn State in the master's in Health Administration program. Cristen signed up for the FastStart program in hopes of gaining valuable Penn State mentors—which she did. Keila Whittington, a past Lady Lions' assistant basketball coach, was Cristen's on-campus mentor. She welcomed Cristen to Penn State by picking her up from the airport. It was unfortunate that during her travels, Cristen lost all of her luggage and arrived with nothing. Ms. Whittington offered Cristen lunch and some Lady Lion gear as a start, before taking her on a tour of the campus. Cristen's second mentor was alumnus Ron Carnemolla, now a medical student in Chicago. Through text, phone calls, and e-mail, Ron never let Cristen settle for less than her best, and urged her to not only have big dreams, but to achieve them in the most efficient way possible. Cristen said she is grateful to the FastStart program for the opportunity to meet such wonderful people who truly care for her.

Silpa Cherravuru: Silpa is graduating with a bachelor's degree in engineering. She is planning to work after graduation, but is still in the job hunt. Silpa says her five years at Penn State has provided her with immense emotional as well as academic support, especially through the counselors at the Multicultural Resource Center. She has participated in numerous groups including being a facilitator for the Women in Engineering Program and working with the Red Cross.

Natasha Mayne-Flood: Natasha is graduating with bachelor's degree in Supply Chain and Information Systems. Natasha will be working with Merck & Co. after graduation. She said that her four years here have been very rewarding and memorable, helping her to grow and develop in multiple ways. Natasha held several leadership positions within the Smeal College of Business, she had terrific internship experiences, and she studied abroad in South Korea.

Felix Mojica: Felix is graduating with a bachelor's degree in Supply Chain & Information Systems and will be working with Pepsi after graduation. During his time at Penn State, Felix joined multiple organizations and developed leadership skills that will help him in the future. He also is grateful for the opportunity to study abroad and the chance to meet and network with so many outstanding alumni through FastStart.

Brandy Robertson: Brandy is graduating with a bachelor's degree in Supply Chain and Information Systems. She plans to work but does not yet have a job. During the past four years, she was able to see herself truly grow. Brandy is thankful to have been able to attend Penn State and says although it was a tough challenge it feels great to have been able to do it.

Wei Shi: Wei is graduating with a bachelor's degree in Electrical Engineering with a minor in Economics. Wei will be working with Chevron after graduation and has had internships or Co-ops with General Electric, General Motors, and Chevron. Wei highly recommends that freshmen and sophomores start looking for internship's/co-op's early on to have a fast start that will help in the future.



Congratulations to all the graduating seniors, more than 40 total, who had participated in the FastStart Mentoring Program as first-year students.

Campus Events Highlight

NHBA hosts its annual Speak for Diversity Competition

By Angela Barajas (sophomore, journalism)

The National Hispanic Business Association hosted its annual "Speak for Diversity Competition" on Feb. 17, 2009 at Heritage Hall. The three winners of the monologue competition received scholarships ranging from \$50–\$150.

The event, which was sponsored by Abercrombie & Fitch and the Latino Student Department, was started to help understand the different backgrounds of Penn State students.

Toya Spencer, diversity manager at A&F, began the program by asking questions of audience and the audience responded by standing up if they related to the question. The 140 attendees participated enthusiastically in this interactive activity. "It seemed like people learned a lot about themselves," said Johanna Maldonado (junior, psychology).

The second portion of the evening started once the four participants were introduced. Maldonado took first prize with her short story titled "Lola, Teresa, and Maya." The story narrated the lives of three best friends going out to the movies, but once they go their separate ways, they each face their own personal issues.

The second-place winner was Mayra Leon (junior, biobehavioral health), and third place went to Jasmine Rushum (freshman, public relations).

Martin Luther King Jr.'s Oratorical Contest

By Unique Parker (junior, journalism)

The month-long celebration of community service and programs to honor Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. ended with the Martin Luther King Jr. Oratorical Contest. The contest was hosted by the Gamma Nu Chapter of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Incorporated, and a fraternity that Dr. King was a member of during his life. The topic of the oratorical contest was "Make a Career

of Humanity..." and each participant had to give a speech about the topic. The contestants had to either explain how they believed Dr. King made a career of humanity or how they would also make a career of humanity in the future. The contest featured four contestants and a guest speaker, who was also a member of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity. The guest speaker gave a speech on how everybody could make a career of humanity if they tried. He explained that he did a job search and found thousands of community service jobs that were looking to hire people. He also said a key way to help your community is to network with people because those people can help you advance your career.

FastStart Advertisements

By FastStart Advisory Board

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Do you want to congratulate your mentor/protégé on a recent accomplishment? Did you do something worth recognition? We want to know. E-mail us at FastStartInfo@psu.edu and we'll post your comments in future newsletters. Be sure to include your name, the name of the person you are congratulating, and a brief description of the accomplishment.



Dear Advisory Board,

Where would I be able to send questions and/or comments about my experiences with FastStart? Thanks.

*Sincerely,
A FastStart Student*

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This is the perfect place to send your questions or comments. The Student Advisory Board would like to help make your experience with FastStart a more positive one. E-mail us at FastStartInfo@psu.edu, and your questions will be answered by a member of our group. Mentors are welcome to e-mail us as well. We'll pick a question or comment to post in future newsletters.

**Sincerely,
The Student Advisory Board**

Questions

We welcome your comments and questions. To get involved, call 814-863-6386 or e-mail FastStartInfo@psu.edu.