

A Time Well Spent in The Basque Country

I sit here in the Sheridan County Fulmer Library, reminiscing on July and all of those experiences. Here, it smells like smoke. Not like the cigarette smoke I used to smell at night from my host dad, Ramon, but wood smoke from the fires in Montana. The sky is a hazy yellow, such a muted view in contrast to the deep blue skies of Madrid. I remember looking upwards and seeing pride flags hanging from balconies, shop windows, and laundry lines, and the joy that sparked in my heart. I remember my host mother making me tomato and olive oil tostadas in the morning, and the piles of scraps in the middle of the table at dinner: one for unfinished food for the cats, and one for compost. I remember the vinegar-y salads and the odd bone I accidentally ate, and I remember it all fondly. I could say that this trip did nothing but make me long for something that isn't what I have, but that isn't true. Yes, I long for more, but the interactions I had with my host family, and the ones they had between themselves taught me something much more important: how wonderful our differences can make us. I remember the cousin with blonde hair and piercings who did yoga (and stood on his head too much) spent a year in Cambodia, and always wanted to practice English. I remember the grandmother who, every time I saw her, wore the same red and yellow nightgown, and couldn't pronounce "peach cobbler," but loved the dish just the same. They were all a family. A family of differences, but a family full of love. In such a time of turmoil, it is easy to be divided and refuse reconciliation. Peace does not come easily to people with fundamental divides like religion and politics. Peace will not come to the world as it does to a family. Will there ever be a time when we will declare no enemies? No violence or division? Humanity is deeply flawed, and our own personal interests, the desires for comfort and protection, can keep us apart. The only way to combat the closed mind is through personal experience. One must push himself into uncomfortable terrain in order to establish a larger domain of experience. Division is not a governmental problem, it is a personal one. Student Diplomacy Corps has taught me how to welcome discomfort because of the growth it provides. Dealing with the language barrier when I first arrived in Spain was overwhelming, but the experience helped me grow immensely in my ability to communicate and to persevere. Before I went, I assumed people would dislike me because I am American, but I was wrong. Everyone I met loved to see that I was slowly becoming better at understanding and speaking in their language; it was a personal effort that they appreciated. They made no assumptions based on my nationality and our government; instead, they understood our particular differences, and they welcomed every attempt I made to share myself. It takes work to grow, and the only way we will ever achieve peace is through this growth. My trip with Student Diplomacy Corps opened my world and my heart to a country I had never seen before, and a personal experience I will remember forever.