

Colenda, Cameron
"Proud to be an American" is not just a cliché-My Personal Journey

I was a typical American teenager, growing up in the mountains of New Mexico. I took many of our American freedoms, ideals, and history for granted. Then I spent a semester abroad as an exchange student in Italy and everything changed.

I attended an international school full of Europeans, mostly Italians, French, and British; I was the only American teenager in a school of nearly 1500 students. I was under the social microscope, everybody knew me as *if Americano* and watched what I did, even what I wore. I became the designated school expert on everything American. I was challenged almost daily on some aspect of American culture or foreign policy, often by teachers trying to say something bad about the United States. Even while many people expressed admiration for this country, there was an astonishing level of naïveté about America, especially with regard to race and gender. Some students couldn't understand why my English was so good if I was from Mexico (they had a hard time with New Mexico being a state, not a country). I had to deal with the French culture snobs who one minute would ask to download some of my American rock and roll, the next attack American standards and "cultural imperialism."

The school I attended was tough; I took thirteen courses. The students had to study harder than anything I had ever experienced. The tests were daily, often oral, and in Italian and I didn't know six words of Italian. Because the school was so hard, all the kids cheated. I mean everybody, even my Italian "sisters." But this was different--blatant and everywhere. I knew that the other kids would watch to see what I did when confronted with my first academic challenge. I resolved to show them that this American would not cheat. Most were surprised, some even offended by my refusal to cheat. But I would not let them say that *it Americano* cheated. Instead, I worked harder. When I came home from school, I had time for a snack, and then would hit the books until dinner, with more study after eating. My work ethic blossomed. I had never worked so hard or enjoyed school work more. (Really!). Five months later, my final exam in physics was to explain Einstein's Theory in Italian --and I passed!

I thank my lucky stars that my NM high school allowed me to take Advanced Placement US Government as a sophomore which helped immensely. I am carrying an "A" in AP US History this year as a result of my travels in Europe and have a better appreciation for all things American.

America is not perfect. But I have seen and experienced other cultures whose faults are often more glaring than ours. When I returned home, I got off the airplane in Washington and saw the American flag--here's a cliché for you--I actually got a lump in my throat. I was glad to be home and proud to be an American.