

**Testimonial submitted by Ashley Halsten
Recipient of the 2013 Judith Peters *Aprender ayudando* Spanish Service Award**

When I packed my bags up to spend my summer in Chile, I went down with the intention of serving the community, determined to use my abilities to “fix” their hardships. After experiencing the culture, I soon found that as much as I was serving their community, they were teaching me so much more.

Some of these people do not have running water in their homes, school can be a place of violence rather than a safe environment promoting higher education, and parents battling drug addictions create a difficult lifestyle, to say the least. The difference between the American culture and the Chilean culture is that in Chile, not once did I hear anyone complain about their difficulties. I am reminded of the last full day that we were in Chile. We spent the day hiking with our “host” family, exploring wonders of nature. It was getting late and we had a long hike back to the bus stop that would take us to our home. As we were walking, while our feet were getting sore, temperature dropping, and growing tired, a family with a pick up truck drove by, offering us a ride. Relieved, we piled in the back of the truck, greeted by a father and his two sons along for the ride. Rather than complaining how cold, tired and anxious we were to return home, our “host” family sang Chilean camp songs the whole ride home. Even the other family sharing the trunk space in the back with us, chimed in. I don’t think anyone even introduced themselves, instead we bonded over taking turns teaching each other favorite camp songs. Come the end of the ride, they were even fluent in “Boom-Chick-A-Boom.”

This is a culture that thrives on relationships. People take the extra 15 minutes to see how you are doing, even if it means being late for a meeting that started a half hour ago. People are not attached to their electronic devices either. A 30-minute bus ride is spent talking about your day with the person next to you, or serenading in the back of a pick up truck rather than texting your BFF Jill. It is almost as if there is no sense of time here. You can show up for an hour late for a meeting, spend the meeting talking in circles, before you know it, three hours have past and nobody seems to mind. There is not really a schedule, or at least if there is one, no one seems to be following it. Although I may not always be able to experience the freedom of a non-schedule oriented lifestyle in the American culture, I have however learned the importance of valuing my relationships with others. It is taking those extra moments to enjoy the time with friends, family and even strangers that you help learn the words to “Boom-Chick-A-Boom,” that make an impact.

It is my Spanish successes, like having enough Spanish ability to be able to translate an email from English to Spanish, and again Spanish to English for one of the women at the hostel in San Pedro, or successfully ordering the correct fruit at the market for dinner, or even one my Chilean friends telling me that I am understanding the language faster, that encourages me to continue to take risks using my Spanish and not give up. This experience has helped my confidence grow to not be afraid to reach out to others in the Valparaíso, Indiana and Aurora, Illinois Hispanic community. I have learned that I do not have to travel to another continent to make an impact in the community. Spanish has opened opportunities for me to be able to serve not only abroad, but in my local community, even if that means occasionally asking for the “palta” instead of the “pala” to sweep up the dining room at Las Cañas (the community center in Valparaíso, Chile) in the process