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A Not-So Ecuadorian Girl in an Ecuadorian Family

Before I begin, I should probably share an important fact with you that is relevant to this subject: I'm not actually Hispanic. Although I love the Spanish language, watch telenovelas religiously (which is actually just embarrassing), eat Mexican food without abandon, have many Hispanic friends, and have a dream to one day marry Javier Bardem, there is actually no Hispanic blood coursing through these veins. You may wonder then why I'm writing a paper on Hispanic culture; it's because I have a family in Ecuador. Yes, all the stuff I just said is true. I was born in the United States to parents who were born in the United States; my heritage is Irish, Italian, and German. Despite all this, I still have a loving family in Ecuador, and they have unwittingly made me love and appreciate my own family more than I ever had before.

In the fall semester of 2007, my Spanish professor Roxana Levin told all her classes about an upcoming trip to Cuenca, Ecuador. It would be a month long, and the trip would count as three Spanish credit hours. Roxana placed the sign up sheet at the front of the class, and although I knew nothing about Ecuador, I put my name on the list anyway. I thought, "I don't care what the country's like, my parents and I will be on separate continents!" Looking back it seems so immature, but before the trip I'd never lived away from my parents, so it was a big event. I was so excited about being able to do whatever I wanted in a foreign country. All the students on the trip were going to stay

with families, and we all received tidbits of information before we left. The only things I knew about my future family were their names and that they had a dog.

What I was most nervous about was what my family would be like. While my Hispanic friends had exposed me to many aspects of the culture, they had all moved to the United States without their parents, so I didn't have a great knowledge of family dynamics. As soon as I met my host family and saw the way they interacted with each other, I felt the warmth and understood the importance of the family bond in Latin America. It also occurred to me that I had not at all rid myself of the parental influence I was so eager to escape. My host mother really was like my own mother, always asking me where I was going, worrying about me, asking me millions of questions when I came home late. I was never just a student living in their house; I was essentially a daughter. You would think that with my desire to be independent I would've hated this arrangement, but experiencing the incredibly close ties of an Ecuadorian family was something beautiful.

Every day, the majority of people in Cuenca left school or work to go home and eat lunch with their families. As an American, that astounded me. I thought, "How can they just drop everything, in the middle of the day?!" I grew to love this custom, and I still wish that people practiced it in the United States. This daily routine made me recognize the fundamental difference between the lifestyle in Ecuador and the lifestyle in the U.S.: in Ecuador, most people have the capacity to slow down, and keep their loved ones as their top priority. So many families in the U.S. now have adopted non-stop activity lifestyles, in which family interaction consists of constantly rushing from one place to the next without actually bonding.

Another stark difference I noticed in not only family interactions, but in interactions among all people were the expressions of kindness. In Ecuador, friends and family almost always greet you with a hug and a kiss on the cheek. At first, this custom seemed uncomfortable to me, having people kiss me on the cheek all the time. Soon it became commonplace to me, and I now wonder why people in the U.S. can seem so cold and distant when interacting with each other.

The only downside to living with a family with such strong and healthy relationships was the way it touched my heart and how it made me miss my own family. Every single day, my host sister and her husband would come to the house with their baby boy, and everyone, including myself, poured their affections over him. I thought that baby must've been the most adored human on the planet. Seeing my host mother and sister interact was what really got to me; they bickered, they disagreed, and they loved each other unconditionally. I began to miss my own mother terribly.

When I returned to the U.S. and saw my parents in the airport, it was unlike any experience I've ever had. I was overwhelmed with gratitude, and I gave them big hugs, which is something I probably wouldn't have done so openly before. Going to Ecuador was more than just an amazing trip; it made me change the way I treat the people I love.