

LEARNING NEW PERSPECTIVES STUDYING POLITICS ABROAD IN CHILE

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By Ivan Thirion

Elliott Smith is a junior majoring in political science from Washington D.C. He recently came back from his study abroad trip in Chile. He spent the fall 2016 semester there, studying politics, exploring the country, and living with a Chilean host family.



Through the study abroad programs offered by Radford's International Education Center, Smith decided to take the initiative to go to Chile to study politics, learn from a foreign culture, learn new perspectives, and practice his Spanish skills.

Smith described his semester in Chile as an "unforgettable experience" where he learned not only about the culture and the country, but also about himself.

"I had a good support system, a smooth transition, and amazing host family that supported me a lot," Smith said.

Smith explained that he found several things to be very different from life in the United States. Smith expressed how some things, such as seeing the extremely poor 'barrios' (slums) and seeing several dogs living on the streets gave him culture shock. He described the Chilean culture as very family-orientated, kind, warm, and welcoming.

"They always follow a schedule. My family and I would sit down at the table every evening and have dinner together," Smith said. "That's something that I valued a lot, eating for hours and having a conversation."

During his experience in Chile, Smith got the opportunity to learn about the politics and history of Chile which broadened his perspectives in different issues. One of the things Smith got to learn about is the history of Augusto Pinochet's regime. Pinochet was a military dictator who ruled for more than 15 years. Smith's host family was personally affected by Pinochet's government, as they got to experience the U.S.-backed coup d'état on September 11, 1973 that overthrew the democratically elected socialist President Salvador Allende, from whom Pinochet took over power.

Smith also got the opportunity to learn about the horrors that his host family had to live during Pinochet's regime. They told Smith about how members of Pinochet's military junta would break into their house and harass them.

"The mom was pregnant at that time," Smith said. "They had to flee to Mexico City to save their lives."

According to the Chilean government, the total number of deaths and forced disappearances during Pinochet's dictatorship stands at 3,095.

"In my class there was a girl that had a different perspective about Pinochet," Smith said. "She pointed out the fact that most people generally focus on the bad things that Pinochet did rather than the good ones."

Smith explained how that girl's family worked for Pinochet's government and how her family was benefited at that time. She, therefore, had a different perspective about him in comparison to other Chileans that argue that his government was undemocratic and authoritarian.

"That made me look at these historical facts with a different perspective," Smith said.

In addition to learning about the politics, history, and culture of Chile, Smith also got to travel across the country from north to south, even go to Mendoza, Argentina. Smith and other international students decided to rent a van and travel across the country. Smith told how it was interesting to see the change in culture and ethnic groups in Chile based on the location where he was.

"People in the north tend to be predominantly indigenous while people in the south tend to have predominantly European roots," Smith said.

During his experience living in Chile, Smith also had the chance to volunteer for 'Un Techo Para Chile' ('A Roof for Chile'), also known as, 'TECHO' ('Roof'), a nonprofit organization focused in mobilizing youth volunteers to fight extreme poverty in Chile and Latin America. Smith described how poor people in Chile lived mostly in the mountains and had dirt soccer fields on which they play soccer. Something that impressed Smith was how happy and friendly people were disregarding the poverty under which they lived.

Smith believed that this trip helped him mature as a person and become more independent besides of giving him a different and broader perspective about life. Smith recommends and encourages other students at Radford University to do the same.

"It was a fascinating and exciting experience that I will never forget."