After taking a sociology class on the issues surrounding Mexican migration last fall semester, I heard such a moving story that made me realize how incredibly important it was for me to live in Mexico. Our professor invited a guest speaker to our class to discuss with us the issue of detention centers along the U.S.-Mexico border. Mr. Gonzalez was not a citizen of the United States, but rather a legal resident who had lived in Wisconsin for 25 years. Yet in January 2007, after a family visit to Mexico, he was detained while re-entering the United States under new federal mandatory detention laws. Mr. Gonzalez, because he was not a United States citizen, but rather a legal resident, was detained on the basis of a drug possession charge from 1989. Although he had already paid the price for this crime, under new laws passed since September 11th Mr. Gonzalez was sent to a detention center in Laredo, Texas where he was kept for eighty days.

After hearing Mr. Gonzalez’s story and educating myself further on the complicated and controversial issues surrounding the immigration debate, I realized that, in order to move forward in my future career of working with immigrants, it was absolutely essential that I lived in Mexico and continue to educate myself on these issues.

This past summer, I completed an internship program with the Center for Global Justice. This is a non-profit organization in San Miguel de Allende, Mexico run primarily by retired professors from the United States. The Center’s aim is to help small neighboring communities lift themselves out of poverty by organizing together and forming cooperatives. The program was divided into two parts, two weeks in San Miguel de Allende taking classes, and then two weeks in the Mexican countryside, living with these communities and participating in the cooperative’s projects.

One of the best advantages to this program, however, was the opportunity to live with host families. I was able to spend two weeks with a family in San Miguel de
Allende, followed by another 2 weeks in the Mexican campo with a different family. Each experience was challenging, specifically on cultural levels, but incredibly rewarding. My stay with these families was, by far, the best part of this program, as I was able to fully immerse myself in Mexican culture, have lots of fun with my little hermanitos, and enjoy the wonderful flavors of true Mexican food.

The internship itself was very thought provoking and challenging. The first two weeks were incredibly long and tedious, as we had classes every day for five hours, discussing many of the issues that I had already studied as a LACIS major. Aside from that, the individuals who worked at the Center for Global Justice spoke little Spanish, and were very one-sided to many of the issues we were discussing. Oftentimes, I felt very frustrated in even trying to have a respectful conversation with individuals involved with the Center, as it was always the fault of the United States, capitalism, or the government. Perhaps what frustrated me the most was that there were little solutions offered within the classroom, and mostly negative attitudes. It would have been nice to have more Mexicans working with this organization, as these are the people who know their country's language, culture, and people.

However, my final two weeks were spent in the Mexican countryside, in a community called Peñón de los Baños. Living and speaking with the people here truly reaffirmed my interest in immigration law, and working with immigrants here in the States. Aside from good food and wonderful company, we also helped the community with developing their cooperative. The Center for Global Justice had given Peñón de los Baños a loan to start this cooperative, a greenhouse filled with organic tomatoes.
However, they had not helped the community with educating them on how to run it. It is a big undertaking and much of the administrative work is like running a business. Most of the members of this community do not have higher than a third grade education level and most cannot read or write. So we discovered many potential problems that the community could face, if the Center did not follow up on our observations.

Furthermore, per request of many individuals in Peñón de los Baños, we completed a census of the community, so they would have a better understanding of who was still living in Mexico and who was in the United States. We found that within the community of 60 families, on average, each family has 3-4 children in the US. This figure does not even include the grandchildren that now live in the States. Most of these individuals do not have papers in the US, and have not returned to Mexico since they left for the US the first time (15 years on average). To see one community so affected by this migration north was shocking. And to think how many hundreds, even thousands, of other communities in Mexico are just like Peñón de los Baños.

After this internship program, despite the disappointment I had with working with the Center for Global Justice, I have taken a way a deeper understanding of US-Mexico relations, migration to the US, and above all else, many great friendships with my host families and other Mexican students in the program. This experience has just reaffirmed my interests in continuing to learn more about the complex economical relationships between the United States and Mexico and how the challenges in globalization affect Mexican migration to our country. Through my internship program with the Center for Global Justice, I have learned that these are not recent issues and the relationship between our two countries, both economical and political, is filled with a great deal of history and emotions that continue to affect
how people, on both sides of the debate, view the issue.