23 June 2010
Valladolid, Spain

Last year I received the LACIS Internship Grant to travel to Spain where I have worked during the past 9 months as an assistant English teacher at a secondary school in Valladolid. I worked for the Language and Cultural Assistants Program, which is directed by the Spanish Ministry of Education. The program provides a grant to recent college graduates to come to Spain and teach their native languages. The premise is for grantees to provide Spanish students and English teachers with valuable language practice through interaction with a native speaker, as well as to broaden their knowledge of other cultures.

Looking back on the school year I’ve fulfilled those duties, but it wasn’t always easy. To begin, I was assigned to a rather difficult school in a very unwelcoming city, both of which caused me a lot of hardship at first. My school, I.E.S. Ribera de Castilla (grades 7-12), is in a poor and troublesome neighborhood, so there are always many issues that come along with that, most of which I was completely unprepared to deal with. Despite being a poor school, Ribera de Castilla receives a grant from the Junta de Castilla y León for an exchange program with another high school in Enfield, Connecticut, which I later enjoyed being part of when the American students came here in April. However, that meant that for my first three weeks in Valladolid, half of the English teachers were absent, including the head of the department, who was my boss. This made it all the more difficult to adjust to my new position; since I was to report to him, no one at the school knew exactly what I was supposed to be doing. In addition, I started earlier than most grantees (in Castilla y León our contract was a month longer, September – June, instead of October – May) so I was actually expected to be all settled in and working before the program’s orientation at the beginning of October, which in my opinion made absolutely no sense.

This only added to my overall unpreparedness to deal with situations at the school. For example, the program guidelines state that we are to teach under the supervision and guidance of a classroom teacher. I was put in a classroom by myself
and basically told to do whatever. To be more specific, I was assigned to teach 12 small English conversation classes per week, however I wanted to do that was up to me. The truth is it miraculously worked out all right (mostly thanks to the fact that I had prior teaching experience and it wasn’t the first time I had worked with children and teenagers). So, I think this ultimately gave me a lot more valuable teaching (and life) experience than I would have gotten otherwise, had I been sent to work at a different school. That’s not to say I just eased in to my impromptu gig as a classroom teacher. It took me a long time to get used to the Spanish education system, which also had to do with my initial desperation here. An unruly and disrespectful standard of student behavior in a system where public school teachers, once they pass state exams, are guaranteed their position for life, often results in institutions with a burned out faculty, as was the case at my school. So, in the end I had to learn how to cope. This meant motivating myself when there was no one else to do so and teaching myself how to teach. I made the most of my only available resources – some chalk, a CD player and a communal photocopier – and did the best I could to educate a group of students who couldn’t care less about English. If the departing gifts my students gave to me last week are any reflection of how well I succeeded in this endeavor, then I did fine by them, and that’s all that matters.

Despite the very difficult first months, I overcame the huge and unexpected challenges. The Ministry of Education hired us and then essentially abandoned us once we arrived to Spain. (This was especially true for the Junta de Castilla y León, whose treatment towards grantees even bordered on disrespect at times). I knew no one in Valladolid and I received none of the promised assistance in finding a place to live or in dealing with Spanish bureaucracy (i.e. the complicated processes involved in obtaining and maintaining legal resident status, opening a bank account, etc.). Above all, I received no formal preparation for teaching English, teaching in Spain, or teaching in a high need institution (especially prevalent in my case) before I actually began. These factors all added together to present some really unfavorable circumstances. But even though I spent a lot of time being disappointed, I managed to make a nice life for myself here. At the school I got to know the English teachers once they were all back in October and they treated me very well, especially my boss
who encouraged a lot of my travels throughout Spain. I traveled a lot, and that’s something I’ve truly enjoyed. Since the position was only part time I found other employment on the side, teaching English at a private academy. I also made some really great friends. And I lived in Spain! Living in a place so wrapped up in history, as is Valladolid, the place where the Spanish language came to be, the place where the likes of Christopher Columbus and Isabella I once resided, was truly an extraordinary experience. It really connected me to my studies of Latin America, as medieval Spain is really where the story all began. Therefore, living here and participating in the Language Assistants Program not only reignited my passions for LACIS, but it also opened my eyes to some new interests in teaching and public policy. I hope to pursue these interests in graduate school.

For now I actually plan to stay another year and continue to teach English through the same program, just in another state. In the end I couldn’t leave a country I once loved so much with such harsh feelings. So, I’m giving it a second chance. I recently received news of my placement for next year: another secondary school, in the city of Vitoria-Gasteiz, capital of the Basque Country. I’m excited to see what new and exciting challenges the second year will bring. What I do know now is that this internship has made me stronger and more well-rounded and therefore ready to deal with any number of situations that present themselves, at work and in life. For that I want to thank the LACIS Department, because without their grant I would have never been able to come in the first place.