

Year in France offers student insights

In class last week, the lecturer asked what would soon be taking place in the French countryside. I, sitting in the back row and seeing no hand raised in front of me, blurted out "grape harvest" almost automatically. For this time last year, I was in the French countryside. And I was harvesting grapes.

Reporter's notebook by Catherine Merten

Studying with the University's program in Poitiers, France, was, to put it tritely, a wonderful experience. The activities during those nine months — moments that seemed monumental at the time — are now lumped together under the vague category of "my year abroad."

Traveling, learning, discovering different places, different people and different parts of myself, I was so caught up in being in France, in absorbing the French culture, that it all seems somehow unreal in retrospect. What was for almost a year an intensely all-encompassing new way of life has lost the powerful grip that it had then, now only affecting my life by the mental pictures of memories. Distanced geographically, I am also distanced emotionally.

Back in the U.S. for my senior year of college, I am repeatedly asked, as are surely all students who studied abroad, "Didn't you go somewhere? How was your year away?" Most people ask these questions casually while passing me on campus.

My "year away" was such a complex and marking experience that it could never be appropriately expressed, especially in passing. So I usually respond with a smile: "It was great," which is of course true. But it's also the biggest understatement of my life.

Every day last year, all of us "foreign students" were challenged. Shopping, getting doing banking business, finding

a haircut — all are undoubtedly a part of a student's quotidian life. Yet in a different culture, with a foreign language, these routine tasks became challenges.

Eventually we learned to buy fresh vegetables at the open-air market. We learned how to use our automatic teller cards. We learned how to describe the desired haircut (sometimes not until after having once suffered with the hair stylist's own ideas of what they thought you wanted). Being able to function in such a society inevitably increased our independence and self-confidence.

Further, encountering people from historical and religious backgrounds often conflicting our own put into question the very elements of our own socialization and heritage.

In Poitiers, we met students from all over the world. These people, along with those I met

me this fall.

Though last year seems far away, French years still mingle in my American days. On Sunday, I expect all stores to be closed and no trucks to run on highways. I'm continually surprised at the relative lack of cigarette smoke in public places. I frequently find myself confused in writing, stuck between the French and English languages. And, unfortunately, I still drive as if there were no speed limit.

The first week of classes here, I went to the French department and saw the professor who I had had for French as a freshman. Speaking French last year became natural for me. I was eventually fluent. But when I saw my professor, I could not speak to her. I choked on the words; my tongue twisted with the accent; my mind raced to translate my thoughts.

It took me a number of days

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while traveling throughout Europe or while picking grapes in Beaujolais, all possessed some idea, opinion or stereotype of America and Americans. Exchanging ideas with them made me reflect on my own culture, my own identity.

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However, it feels like I was away for much longer than nine months. The campus is renovated. Store hours have changed. My favorite coffee place is gone. More friends have cars. And since I turned 21 in France, we now meet for a drink — legally.

My off-campus house offers a much different living arrangement than the women's dorm I lived in last year in France. Ten of us Oregon women lived with roommates downtown in a predominately French dorm (the building in which Joan of Arc was interred in 1429).

Maids cleaned regularly. (I'll never forget someone coming in at 8:30 a.m. to vacuum under our beds.) The front gate locked at 7:30 p.m. Phone calls no later than 10 p.m. Yes, my two-bedroom apartment welcomed

before I could reconcile my "Frenchness" with this environment that had always been strictly American. Now, though, I've settled into equilibrium.

Last Friday I shared bread, wine and cheese with other French speakers at the French House. I made crepes for my housemate, using the appropriate French technique that friends had taught me. As a French teaching assistant, I lead six hours of conversation each week.

France is still, and will always be, a part of my life.

When I recently ran into a guy I lived near two years ago, he didn't recognize me. "Have you changed somehow?" he asked. A lot, I thought to myself. To him, I simply attributed the difference to my haircut.

Catherine Merten is currently a student at Brown University, Providence, R.I.



Correction

In an article previewing the ASUO's Wellness Symposium in Monday's Oregon Daily Emerald, Father Carlos was misidentified as a representative of the Sanctuary Movement. Father Carlos is with the Newman Center.




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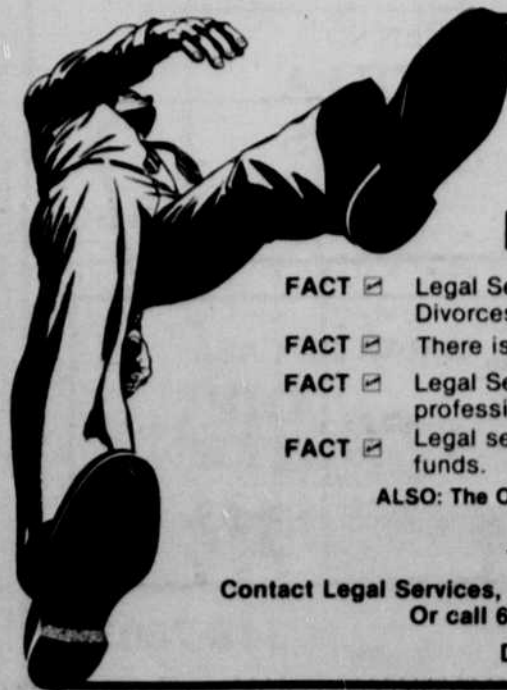
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