

voice of experience

“I really wanted to go to a country where my family was from.”

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Above and below, Scarlett Trillia visits her father's Argentine family farm with her parents while on a recent co-op.

Power to the people

Human services student studies Argentine workers movement in her father's homeland

BY SUSAN SALK

The daughter of immigrants, human services student Scarlett Trillia was thrilled to combine her academic interest in worker cooperatives with a co-op in her father's homeland, Argentina.

During a self-directed, independent experiential learning experience from January to July 2009, Trillia traveled extensively in Argentina, even working in a visit at her father's old, family farm, as she worked to understand the aftereffects of the 2001 economic collapse of the country, and the worker reaction.

She studied the phenomenon that occurred after banks closed, and factory doors were shuttered that saw workers band together to return to work and continue production, even though their supervisors were gone.

"It wasn't a normal unemployment experience in Buenos Aires," she says. "Whole factories were shutting down, and it was not uncommon for a group of 200 female textile workers to suddenly become unemployed together.

"With unemployment reaching 40 percent at one point, people began to organize themselves. Groups of workers would realize they all knew each other, and how to run the whole factory. They wanted to work."

With nobody to rehire them, workers rehired themselves, she says.

An honors student who received grants from arts and sciences and the honors program to pursue her studies, beginning with Mexican women's cooperatives in 2007, Trillia sought to study similar women's groups in Argentina.

Traveling the country, she contacted a string of distant relatives of her father's, and stayed with family friends, as she ferreted out people to interview, and stories to tell. "I talked to someone connected with a cement company, and I stayed with two women so I could study how they got educated and how they went about trying to open a small business," she says.

Eventually, she focused her studies on large teams of trash-pickers, who organized into cooperatives, and built a recycling business from found material. "People would go out for six hours in the evening—some had staked claims on different parts of the city—and they would gather up recyclables, like cardboard, and sell it to a processor," she says. "A couple of groups formed a cooperative so they could increase their volume of cardboard and fetch a better price."

Her interest in work cooperatives sprang from her human services studies, and will possibly lead to grad school pursuits, either in California, New Mexico or Vancouver, British Columbia.

Argentina had always been a future destination for her. Her father is from Argentina, so Trillia was able to connect with distant relatives and visit her father's family farm along the way.

"My father has a very close-knit family. While I was there, I spent a lot of time speaking Spanish and English with them, and enjoying Argentine food. It was wonderful," she adds. "I really wanted to go where my family was from, and Northeastern allowed me to connect with my roots, and pursue my studies."

