

February-March 2010 Newsletter

Spotlight on Joanna Zuckerman Bernstein, IMIFAP, Mexico City

I typically see 2,000 people, hear 400 of snippets of conversations, smell 200 different foods, and listen to 50 cell phones ring before I even arrive at the office every morning.

My day usually goes as follows:

As I step outside my apartment, I am greeted by blaring *cumbia* from the taco stand five feet from my door. I say *buenos días* to the owner of the *tienda de abarrotes* (corner store) to the left of my apartment and the woman at the Laundromat to my right. She may be smoking her third cigarette of the day. Two doors down at the *tortillería*, they are already churning out the staple item in every Mexican's diet, quickly scooped up by housewives, maids, and men in suits alike. I weave my way down the block to the metro, through stands selling pirated DVDs dubbed in Spanish, candy and loose cigarettes, 3 pesos a piece.

Get on the metro, or, *attempt* to get on the metro. Sometimes I push and push and I still can't get on. Pushing is accepted in a city with over 20 million people and 5 million metro users daily. So I don't feel bad.

I arrive at the office and usually spend at least 10 minutes saying hello to everyone. In Mexico, you can't just walk in and go to your desk. You have to walk around to everyone's desk and give each person a kiss on the cheek. There are 35 people working in the IMIFAP office, though I only say hello to the people who work on my floor, the third floor.



I have lived in cities for my whole life: Philadelphia, New York, Madrid. But after nearly seven months in Mexico City, I still can't get over the size of the city. Ask a cab driver and he'll tell you that he only knows one-eighth of the city well. Every car has a *guía roji*; at 154 pages, it's the undisputed king of maps. The city is exciting, chaotic, and at times, overstimulating.

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Joanna with her colleagues at IMIFAP

Fortunately, the Mexican Institute of Family and Population Research (IMIFAP) is a very small, intimate community within this sprawling metropolis. IMIFAP is a health and development NGO, dedicated to creating life skills programs for people living in marginalized urban and rural communities, promoting healthy lifestyles and empowering them to take control of their lives and change themselves, their families and their communities.

We have a number of “Healthy IMIFAP” initiatives for the staff in the office, so that we will bond as a team, and feel healthy and motivated to improve our work and our lives. We take exercise and stretching classes four times a week, downstairs on the first floor. At 4pm, even the president sheds her pantsuit and joins us for *Zumba*, a mix of aerobics and Latin American dance.

As my first full-time job, my PiLA fellowship at IMIFAP has given me an exceptional opportunity to grow and cultivate my skills and interests. I am not in the field, but I am spending 7 hours a day with a mostly Mexican staff, enabling me to gain insight into Mexican culture and practice using my growing vocabulary of slang words.

I was originally supposed to work exclusively on grant-writing, but as I noticed other areas that demanded increased attention, I began to move into different parts of the organization. I dabble in marketing, event-planning, graphic design and copy-editing, depending on the week. One day I may be editing the website; another day, I am meeting with the president and vicepresident about how to better define the mission and objectives of IMIFAP to reach a wider audience of future program participants as well as donors.



Joanna at Zumba class with her co-workers



Joanna at IMIFAP exchanging gifts with co-workers

I am even busier outside of work. In the afternoons, I may stroll along *Reforma*, famous dictator Porfirio Diaz’ imitation of a Parisian boulevard. You can follow *Reforma* all the way from Chapultepec, Latin America’s largest park, to the *Zona Rosa* (literally, “Pink Zone”), the historically gay neighborhood which I call home, to the museums, churches and palaces of the *Centro Histórico*.

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Holidays and long weekends have given me ample opportunity to travel, and I am looking forward to a post-fellowship road trip in the Southeast of Mexico.



Joanna with family at Teotihuacan

But there is no such thing as boredom, or solitude in Mexico City. It's 5pm and I'm leaving work. Dirty workout clothes in hand, I pay a few pesos to take the *micro*, a small green stick-shift van which lurches along back to my neighborhood, often vibrating to the beat of whatever music the driver prefers. I wave *buenas tardes* to the *tienda de abarrotes* owner, drinking his afternoon beer. I'm home. Deep breath. I sit in my room. The silence grows, starts to feel oppressive. Back out to the street.



Joanna with co-workers at Xochimilco

Letter from the Editor

Dear Friends of PiLA,

Our placement process is almost complete and as of today, we already have 17 fellows for 2010-11. Further, we will have two more fellows doing a second year, both at the Amazon Conservation Association. This year, we are adding a few new partner organizations, including Mujeres Empresarias (microfinance in Chile), Libras de Amor (malnutrition alleviation in El Salvador—formerly a summer internship), and reintroducing Convivencia Educativa, in Mexico.

This year's class of fellows is an impressive group; while most are about to graduate this year, several have been out in the workforce and are now seeking to expand their experiences from the domestic to the international. I am excited about the range of their interests and inspired by their commitment to public service and Latin America.

In order for PiLA to continue to expand its offerings to meet candidate interest and to support our fellows in the best way possible, I would ask you will to consider making a donation this year if you have not already added your name to our list of supporters. To our current donors, I extend a warm thank you—we could not run this thriving program without you!

Our fellows bring a lot to the organizations with which they work and enable them to accomplish more with their resources than they would otherwise be able. Several of our partner organizations have asked me if we could send them two fellows this year, but unfortunately, we are not able to support extra fellows with these organizations. It is thrilling to hear that our partners are so enthusiastic about PiLA fellows that they would like to host more than one. With your support, we could make this happen and it's not too late to do it for this year!

Best wishes,



Claire Brown '94
Executive Director

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