SINCE 1959, thousands of students have journeyed to the University’s study-abroad center in Florence, where they immerse themselves in Italian culture and share the experiences of a lifetime

BY DOROTHEA BARRETT
"I’m sure that my semester abroad will change my outlook. It will open me to a whole new spectrum of what to expect of the world and what the world expects of me."  —Maria Gabriela Hernandez ’10, SU in Florence, Fall 2009

AS A TEACHER OF CREATIVE WRITING AT SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY IN FLORENCE (SUF), I often hear about students’ expectations of their study-abroad experience. Again and again, they voice the hope that their semester in Florence will change them radically, teaching them independence and new ways of thinking. It was with surprise and interest, then, that I discovered, during the past few months of networking with SUF alumni, how deeply their time here really does affect their lives. “It is hard to forget a nanosecond of that fantastic and life-changing time,” says Erika Schneider Van Syoc, who studied at SUF in spring 1998 and is now a graduate student at Mary Baldwin College in Virginia. “It was my first real experience..."
Professor Matteo Duni takes advantage of the beautiful weather to teach his course, A History of Witchcraft, in the garden next to the Villa Rossa.

with foreign language, and I had no idea how much I could learn. I was basically in a state of awe and wonder the whole time.”

Professor Rab Hatfield, who has taught art history at SUF since 1972, has noticed the changes in his students. “Study in Florence is often a life-changing experience,” he says. “An impressive number of my former students have remained here, sometimes because they found a spouse here, sometimes just because they like it better. But all still consider themselves Americans. Even those students who do not remain usually go home with different attitudes toward their country. I think that is because being here for some length of time allows one to learn to see the U.S. from ‘outside,’ in a new and different perspective.”

SUF, one of the oldest American study-abroad programs in Italy, celebrated its 50th anniversary this fall (see “Reuniting at Festa,” page 37). Throughout its history, SUF has grown and evolved, but the program’s spirit has remained the same: a deep commitment to intercultural encounters and to the study of Italian society and arts through the centuries. Florence is the ideal setting in which to realize that commitment. This small, beautiful, vibrant city is both a living history of the Renaissance and a thriving modern Italian community. SUF alumni of all ages claim their time here transformed them. Many discovered careers while here; for some, it triggered a lifelong interest in travel and other cultures; a few even fell in love here and remember their semester abroad as the beginning of a lifetime together.

Arriving at the Villa Rossa

When the program started in 1959, there were about 35 students per semester. For the first decade or so, students came over together from the States by ship, accompanied by professors, who gave them Italian language lessons during the voyage. The Class of 1970 was the first to fly over. Once in Florence, students were placed with Italian host families, attended classes at the Villa Rossa, and explored the city’s streets, piazzas, churches, and
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—Penny Shapiro-Bryan, SUF 1964

museums. Over the years, the campus expanded as the student body and the program’s academic offerings increased, but these three elements—life with the host family, classes, and the city itself—remain the cornerstones of the students’ experience.

The Villa Rossa, an elegant 19th-century Florentine villa, has been SUF’s main campus building since the program began. Today, it houses administrative offices, classrooms, a snack bar, and a computer lab. The architecture studios at Piazzale Donatello 25 and the Studio Arts building at Piazzale Donatello 21 have large well-lit rooms with high ceilings and tall windows, providing an ideal environment for drawing, painting, and sculpture. In 2006, the Villino was added to the campus. This charming 19th-century palazzo, built as a private residence in 1884, now houses the library, the media lab, a classroom, and faculty offices. The Villino’s addition also entailed a remodeling and extension of the lovely garden that sits between it and the Villa Rossa. The garden has two new sculptures, the Narciso fountain by Romano Luccacchini and the Huntress by Marco Fallani, which were donated by SU Abroad Advisory Committee members Peter Weller G’05 and Nora Lavori, respectively.

For the first 20 years, the program primarily catered to SU students. By the late ’70s, however, SUF’s student body was larger and more diverse, including students from other universities. Today, SUF hosts about 300 students from more than 80 universities each semester. The program consists of five departments: art history; architecture; studio arts; humanities, social sciences, and business; and Italian language and culture. In addition to the wealth of courses, students are offered a variety of field trips and opportu-
nities to work in the community (see “Immersed in Daily Life,” page 39). For those who have a good command of Italian, there’s an option to take classes at the University of Florence and other Florentine institutions of higher education.

**An Influential Time**

Penny Shapiro-Bryan, who attended SUF in spring 1964, is one of the many SUF alumni who consider their Florence experience as transformative, deeply affecting their way of thinking, career choices, and decisions they’ve made ever since. Last spring, Shapiro-Bryan, now a faculty member at Chapman University in California, spent her sabbatical semester in Florence with her husband, George, visiting the Villa Rossa for the first time in 45 years. “My semester in Florence definitely was a turning point for me,” Shapiro-Bryan says. “It completely changed my idea of what education is. Before, I thought that education happened in the classroom and the library, but when I came to Florence I felt that walking through the city was an education. The aesthetic sense wasn’t just in the museums. It was in the streets and piazzas.

I have been an educator for four decades now, and my areas of focus are social justice, democracy, literacy, and aesthetics. A common thread is the development of human expression and choice—ideas that flourished here during the Renaissance and changed the world forever. My own aesthetic development is deeply rooted here at the Villa Rossa.”

Gary Radke ’73 spent the spring semester of 1972 at SUF and went on to become a distinguished art historian and Dean’s Professor of the Humanities at SU (see “Reveling in Italian Renaissance Art,” page 16). Radke, who teaches at the Florence center, credits his semester abroad as a life-changing experience. “It’s meant everything to me,” he says. “It made me who I am today. If I hadn’t gone to Florence and if I hadn’t been in the Syracuse program, I wouldn’t have been able to do the kind of art history I do—and that’s because in the Syracuse program you were required, as the vast majority of our undergraduates still are, to live with an Italian family. It’s that difficult, very challenging experience of living with people with whom you don’t share enough words, with whom you don’t share enough common expectations, that helps you to grow and appreciate the world.”

Christian Sottile G’99, an architect in Savannah, Georgia, spent the 1998-99 academic year as a graduate student at SUF. Sottile and his wife, Amy, are partners in the architectural firm Sottile & Sottile, and their civic master plan for Savannah’s East Riverfront won the 2009 Charter Award from the Congress for the New Urbanism. Sottile sees his SUF experience as fundamental to their successful practice. “My study in Florence led to a much deeper understanding of the evolutions and permanencies in urbanism,” he says. “These experiences have profoundly influenced my current work.”

Some SUF students are second generation: They were inspired to come to Florence by hearing family members—parents, aunts, or uncles—talk about their experiences. Eleanor DeVries, for example, was at SUF in 1960, and her daughter, Anne, attended in 1999. There are love stories, too. Mary Benton, a Virginia-based artist, met her husband, Douglas Barnes, at SUF in the spring ’79 semester. “Syracuse University in Florence certainly changed my life, since that’s where I met my husband of 27 years,” Benton says. “Af-

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—Christian Sottile G’99, architect, Savannah, Georgia
REUNITING AT FESTA

IN OCTOBER, SUF ALUMNI FROM AROUND the world returned to Florence to participate in the center’s 50th Anniversary Festa, a three-day celebration with an optional fourth-day excursion to the Tuscan countryside. “My semester in Florence was by far my best in college, but on this visit I saw so many things that I never had the opportunity to see while living in Florence,” said Isabel Smith Margulies, SUF ’98, of Paris.

SU Abroad executive director Jon Booth said Festa allowed alumni with a shared past to re-experience Florence together and celebrate the profound impact study abroad had on their lives. “The faculty and staff did a superb job and enjoyed the opportunity to celebrate the years of continuous quality and accomplishment of SUF,” he said.

Festa kicked off on October 25 with a reunion party at the Villa Rossa, where SUF alumni enjoyed the company of SUF professors, administrators, and host families. For the next two days, they were offered a variety of classes and trips around the historic center of Florence. They were guests at a reception hosted by dignitaries of Florentine political and cultural life and treated to a farewell dinner at the U.S. Consulate. On the fourth day, alumni and SUF professors visited the scenic southern Tuscany hill towns of Pienza and Montalcino, hearing their histories, and tasting the famous Brunello wine. The final stop was the splendid medieval church of Sant’Antimo. “I enjoyed every bit of the 50th celebration. It was one of the most intense experiences I’ve had in a long time,” said Michael Anzivina ’62, SUF ’60, who lives in New York City. “The trip to southern Tuscany on a beautiful autumn day also reminded me what a privilege it was to have participated in the SUF program many years ago.”

Reunion photographs (clockwise from top left): a private visit to the Baptistry and Cathedral of Florence; touring San Lorenzo and the Laurentian Library; Baptistry and Cathedral visit; closing ceremony and tour at the Orsamichele Church and Museum; reunion party at the Villa Rossa. For more images and information on the 50th reunion, visit www.syr.fi.it/r-news.php#0.
ter finishing up at Vassar and Wellesley, respectively, Doug and I married. He joined the foreign service, and we spent the next two decades living in different countries: Warsaw, communist Poland; Palermo, Sicily; Rangoon, Myanmar; Havana, Cuba; Lima, Peru; and San Jose, Costa Rica. I became a painter, sculptor, jewelry designer during all those years abroad.”

John Gaetano and Allison Cozzini, who met at SUF in fall 1999, are now married. Briar Goldberg and Elliot Freeman, from the fall 2002 program, recently got engaged on a visit to Florence and celebrated that evening with her host family. “We can’t wait until our next trip,” Goldberg says. “It’s always good to go back, visit the host family, eat at the old spots, and, of course, check out the Villa Rossa.”

Many SUF alumni stay in contact with their host families. “I had the greatest host family—Vera and Andrea Miola,” says Cody Rae Gruber, who studied at SUF in spring 2006. “They’ve been hosting SUF students for more than 30 years. I’ve been back to Florence twice since I was there and saw my host parents each time. Andrea passed away a year ago in November [2008]. I write to Vera frequently and have invited her to my wedding. It was a wonderful experience, and Italy, especially Firenze, will be in my heart forever.”

Flavia Simonelli, who has been a host mother to SUF students for 21 years, used similar terms to describe her relationship with the students who have shared her home. “You don’t forget these kids,” she said, speaking in Italian. “They stay in your heart.”

**EDUCATIONAL EXCURSIONS**

**COLLEGE IS OFTEN CONSIDERED A TIME OF SELF-EXPLORATION, and for many SU students that means a time for exploring the world. In addition to semester-long international study programs, SU Abroad and other campus organizations offer spring break and summer trips to places around the globe.**

In May, professors Michael Veley and Patrick T. Ryan of the Department of Sport Management in the College of Human Ecology took 12 students on an “Olympic Odyssey,” a three-week European trip that was the culmination of a spring course tracing the history and culture of the Olympic movement. The group traveled in England, France, Switzerland, and Greece. “It was a transformational experience,” Veley says. “It opened up the students’ eyes in a variety of ways, from seeing the magnitude of the games in ancient days to experiencing the cultures of four different countries.”

The Olympic Odyssey was just one of 30 SU Abroad summer programs offered in 15 countries, including China, India, and Uganda. Several campus organizations created additional travel opportunities. For instance, the Hendricks Chapel Choir toured Chile, Argentina, and Uruguay for two weeks in May, singing in cathedrals, music halls, and other venues. The chapel also sponsors a biannual interfaith journey to study religious traditions, taking a group of Jewish, Muslim, and Christian students to Jerusalem last March. Virginia Yerdon, administrative assistant and special events coordinator for Hendricks Chapel, says the interfaith trip is an eye-opening experience for students. “It makes you so much more aware of what’s going on in the world,” Yerdon says. “Overall, I think it makes you a better person.”

—Lindsay Stein

**TO LEARN MORE ABOUT THESE TRIPS FROM STUDENT PARTICIPANTS, VISIT:**

- [http://olympicodyssey09.blogspot.com](http://olympicodyssey09.blogspot.com)
- [http://hendricks.syr.edu/choir/journal.html](http://hendricks.syr.edu/choir/journal.html)
- [http://hendricks.syr.edu/jerusalem/journal.html](http://hendricks.syr.edu/jerusalem/journal.html)
IMMERSED IN DAILY LIFE

SUF DIRECTOR BARBARA DEIMLING has developed several community outreach initiatives to deepen the students’ sense of immersion in Italian culture and to give something back to the host community. One of these is the internship program, which gives students the opportunity to get involved in everyday Italian life in a variety of workplaces. Internship coordinator Debora Spini places interns in Florentine businesses, cultural institutions, schools, and nongovernmental organizations. They work for academic credit, and each completes a required project summing up the learning experience.

Kelly Bossenmeir, who worked as an intern teaching English in an Italian elementary school in spring 2005, was enthusiastic about the experience. “I really enjoyed my internship, and I looked forward to every Tuesday when I got to go to the Mameli School,” she said at semester’s end. “The students were excited to see me, and that made me feel great.... Now that I have successfully planned and taught lessons, I feel much more competent and confident in my decision to become a teacher. I am so glad I took the internship at Mameli. It was, by far, the most memorable and rewarding experience I had during my stay in Italy.”

Looking Ahead
As SUF celebrates its 50th year, the program’s leaders are looking to the future. SUF director Barbara Deimling, who will step down at semester’s end after guiding the program for nine years, and Jon Booth, executive director of SU Abroad, both see a bright future for the Florence campus—one in which the high academic standards and commitment to cultural diversity that marked the first 50 years are maintained. At the same time, they envision extending and enhancing the program, especially in the areas of community outreach and cultural immersion.

The Syracuse University in Florence program has opened the eyes of three generations of young Americans to the beauties of Europe, the artistic wealth of the Renaissance, and the great pleasure of getting to know another culture. “We look forward to finding exciting new ways of doing even more for the next generations of SUF students,” Deimling says. That, no doubt, will be appreciated by all those who have walked through the doors of the Villa Rossa. “I loved Florence, but have not made it back since my SUF semester in 2000,” says Katrina Boldt, now a freelance writer in Silicon Valley. “Until I do, I can live vicariously through my Italy album and smile when I remember the amazing place I once called home.”