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To the Florence Sister County Commission:

As I begin this essay, with a photo of my Italian homestay family as my phone screensaver and the music of Andrea Bocelli filling my ears, it is difficult to express my thankfulness for your support of my journey. For the rest of my life I will look back upon the four months I spent living at Via Repetti 14, Florence, Italy, and smile.

Each morning I would awake to the sound of Edoardo and Matteo (three and six years-old) running around the house in early morning excitement. I struggle to imagine a scenario where I could be happier to be woken up by the noise of someone else than I was during those four months – I loved it! Emerging from my room, I would hug Benedetta and Lorenzo (my homestay Mom and Dad) saying “Ciao, buongiorno!” as the boys circled us. While Benedetta and Lorenzo attempted to corral the boys, I would make myself a cappuccino, and drink my coffee while looking out upon the city – if it was a particularly clear morning, I would be able to spot the top of the Duomo! Half an hour later I would be walking the streets of Florence, waving to the shop owners I saw every morning. Walking to school meant walking past the Duomo, and arriving at the Piazza Della Repubblica, two of the Florence’s most historical places. There was never a day when this walk did not feel surreal. All of this was just the first hour of my day, yet I believe it serves emblematic of the experience I had. At home with my new Italian family and in a city I now consider home, the experience was genuinely special.

Not only did the Commission’s scholarship help make study abroad financially feasible for me, but it enhanced the experience in tangible ways every single day. It enabled my budget to include daily panini purchases in the city center, and the renting of vespas and bikes on days when I had extra time and hoped to explore the Tuscan hills. The scholarship financed a weekend excursion to Cinque Terra, where I hiked the famous mountains overlooking the Mediterranean Sea from sunrise to sunset. Most importantly, the scholarship enabled me to worry less about my budget, and truly immerse myself in the culture. I will never forget renting a Vespa by myself and carefully navigating the Tuscan hills until I could gaze upon the city of the Renaissance from the highest view possible.

Often, studying abroad felt like a lifetime of lessons packed into rapidly occurring moments of exploration. Everyday was a lesson in empathy. I was learning Italian and constantly practicing at home with Benedetta and Lorenzo, but I certainly was not fluent. Thus, as I walked the city I

was constantly attempting to notice the small things of how locals around me were living and feeling that day. Living in this culture that was not native to me, I was constantly practicing open-mindedness in understanding different ways of life. I believe that the more you travel, the more you realize you do not know. In realizing this, my daily life became one of curiosity, new experiences, and connecting with people over the similarities we did share. For me, this is what was special about my time in Florence. Those small moments everyday when I would encounter a slice of Italian culture that I did not understand or previously know, but would even so, shape me into a person that was even more open-minded.

It is organizations like yours which are truly special, and enable young people to have these moments which will shape the rest of their lives. I can't thank you enough. The Florence Sister County Commission played a massive part in four of the most formative months of my life.

Grazie Mille,

Jared Williams