

Jóvenes Adelante Student Returns from Colombia

By: Geoff Hargreaves

When Lizeth Banca Ceja arrived back in San Miguel from Bogotá, her eyelids were drooping with the late-night travel, but her mind was open wide with the persons, places, and experiences she had encountered in the last two months abroad.

Thanks to grants from the Mexican government and Jóvenes Adelante, this Universidad de Guanajuato undergraduate in biochemistry had been advancing her studies in the lab of the Pontificia Universidad Javeriana in Bogota. With the aid of an internationally recognized scientist, Dr. Claudia Parra, Lizeth had entered a field new to her: mycology, the study of fungi. In addition to learning more about infectious diseases by injecting *candida albicans* into larvae, she was taught how to diagnose problematic samples of blood and urine, collected at local hospitals, contaminated by destructive micro-organisms.

Dr. Parra graciously included Lizeth in her travel plans, and together they attended congresses and seminars outside Bogotá. Lizeth found Colombian academics more open than their Mexican counterparts, happier to work in teams. In contrast, and much to her surprise, her fellow students were more formal, consistently using the Usted form of speech with people their own age and status.

Although she was often homesick, Lizeth tackled the many “first time” experiences with enthusiasm. The working hours were long but weekends brought the thrill of cultural exploration and social activities. Her homestay family was friendly and helpful, often taking her on trips around the city in their car. The center of Bogotá offered many beautiful—and secure—historical sites and museums. Lizeth found she could walk without trepidation the thirty minutes from her home-stay to the laboratory.

To her slight dismay, she found her light clothing to be inadequate for Bogotá’s high elevation climate. At 8,600 feet, it is one of the highest capital cities in the world and has only one season in its year: chilly! The sun sets at 6.15pm like clockwork and the air cools quickly. Lizeth managed by wearing her warmest clothes, in multiple layers, day after day throughout her stay. She laughs about it now, saying, “The people of Colombia are far warmer than the climate!”

What was the greatest benefit that Liz derived from her visit? Without doubt, it was confirmation that she has chosen the right career for herself.

And now? Liz must complete 480 hours of social service to qualify for her degree. This she will do in Queretaro with a company named Pharmservice where a wide range of injectable medications are produced for sale in Mexico and throughout Latin America. By coincidence, it is a Colombian company that opened its doors in Mexico three years ago. With only 200 employees at present, it is expanding quickly. Once her social service is

complete, Liz may be offered a full-time paid position there. If so, she plans to work there for a year, to repay her family for the sacrifices they have made for her career. Hopefully, from there, a Master's degree!