

# An Alumni Perspective on the Fulbright Experience

By Karen Withka Myres '66

The Fulbright Commission had just initiated a new grant program for graduating college students. As a Spanish-speaking Hispanophile, I decided to try for one. Since Latin America candidates were eligible to write up to three grant proposals, I went for the maximum by writing proposals for Peru on politics, Mexico on literacy, and Chile on Marxist social reform.

After making the initial cut, the next hurdle became an interview at Princeton, which produced an interesting twist. The interview panel included a Princeton professor who happened to be the brother of one of my Rosemont classmates. She revealed to me much later that she knew I had been awarded the grant even before I did – though, as I discovered, not for any of the countries for which I had painstakingly crafted those three initial proposals.

In the spring of my senior year, the phone in my dorm rang very early one morning. When I dragged myself down the hall to take the call, a lively voice on the line said, “Don’t pack your bags yet but it looks as if you’ll be going to Montevideo, Uruguay.” Country number four.

At Rosemont in those days, they had a custom (which I assume has long ago been abandoned) of singing at dinner for students who got engaged. On the evening my grant was announced, they broke custom and sang for me, though I was never sure if the serenade occurred because I had won Rosemont’s first Fulbright or because my classmates feared I might never get a husband! In any case, a few months later, just as every other college grad in the Northern Hemisphere was embarking upon a well-deserved summer vacation, my seven colleagues and I ended our week of orientation at Georgetown University and flew down to a wintry Montevideo. In June of 1966, the Southern Hemisphere was very cold — and so were we.

For my fourth project, an option I was invited to explore for this new and unexpected location, I proposed to study the work of Jose Enrique Rodo, a revered Uruguayan essayist, educator and philosopher known to many as the voice of Latin American modernism. But in addition to examining Rodo’s philosophy and writings, the Fulbright experience included classes in sociology, literature, politics and economic development at the University of The Republic (when the students weren’t on strike during the tumultuous 1960’s), frequent pro-Che Guevara rallies, German language studies at the Goethe Institute, numerous embassy functions, plenty of time at the beach, and travel as extensive and frequent as our relatively modest stipends would allow. In varying economy-class combinations, we discovered Brasilia when it was still a pup of a city; celebrated Carnival in Bolivia; walked along the misty paths of Iguasu Falls; climbed around Machu Picchu; sailed across Titicaca, the

world’s highest navigable lake, in a steamboat straight out of “Lord Jim,” and spent many long weekends soaking up the street life and culture of Buenos Aires, a fantastic city located just a hydrofoil ride away from Montevideo. It was not a bad way for poor students to live and it provided an unforgettable education.

This period was also characterized by a total lack of structure. A Fulbright experience does not begin with a syllabus and end with a grade. Instead it facilitates an opportunity, something I have learned well in recent years as director myself of a Fulbright program for scholars from India at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh. We had worked hard to earn this privilege, but how we chose to invest or waste our days “on the ground” was totally our decision. This was the first time since — when? — I would say pre-school when I could spend my days exactly as I wished. The responsibility was both daunting and exciting.

At the end of my year, I requested and was granted a six-month extension. As that period was ending, I was offered a position at the USAID mission, where one of my jobs was to administer a fund that provided grants to non-profit organizations for community development projects in underserved areas of Uruguay.

I remained in Uruguay for almost two years, until I took a new job in Washington,

D.C. at the Partners of the Alliance (now Partners of the Americas) inter-American headquarters, and gained a broader view of this unique organization. After many years away from international education due to geography and marriage, I returned to it once again about a decade ago, first by designing and serving as faculty for international seminars at the University of Pittsburgh and more recently by directing executive education programs for corporate leaders from around the world at Carnegie Mellon’s Tepper School of Business. This included the Indian Fulbright program, which I directed for several years and which in so many ways made me feel that I’d come home.



Above: Karen Myers (center), Rosemont’s first student Fulbright winner, with some of her Fulbright colleagues, enjoying a night out in Montevideo, Uruguay in August 1967.  
Right: Karen (far left) performs at a cultural institute with John Scott, another Fulbright scholar, and the daughter of the U.S. Ambassador to Uruguay.

