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2016-17 Postcards

Postcards from Abroad

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## "Nerna, Nerna!"

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Myrna Najera Perez

Dakar, Senegal

February 7, 2017

### **“Nerna, Nerna!”**

My host mom is such a sweet woman! Every day she wakes up early in the morning so that I can have my breakfast before school. It is very customary to eat a baguette with chocolate spreading and a small cup of tea for breakfast, but I personally don't enjoy the chocolate spreading so she lets me eat the bread as is. She also prepares *Attaya*, traditional African tea for me because she knows I am in love with its incredibly sweet and distinct flavor. Throughout the time I have been here, she has realized that I really enjoy salad, so for the past weeks I have been served salad at least once every day. It is nice to have fresh, crunchy veggies, and I personally love the dressing my mom uses for my salads.

In addition, my host mom has allowed me to help her prep some of the dishes. She thinks it is hysterical to watch me replicate her. It always makes me smile when she allows me to join in such activities because it reminds me that in every culture there are different ways of completing the same task. I was born and raised in Mexico up until my sixth birthday, and in Mexico, many tasks are done in a communal style as well. Although there are similarities in some of the ways in which tasks are done, there is always a slight difference to how tasks are performed. It is always a fun experience to be taught to do things differently. For example, in Mexico, I would wash my clothes by hand like they do here in Senegal. However, in Mexico it is customary to wash clothes on a stone surface called “*lavabo*.” In Senegal, clothes are washed in a bucket by hand. One literally washes the clothes using a left-right scrubbing motion against the palms of the hands. Every time I wash my underclothes, my mom giggles with happiness and tells me “Now you are Senegalese woman!”

The other day I helped my little host sister and her friend wash the floor. First we swept the floor using a hand tool called *baler*. It is made of long, thin, straw-like twigs bundled up to resemble a large brush. It has no attached handle, so you have to be bend while sweeping. Because it is a hand tool, the sweeping motion is different. You have to take long angled hand swings so you can cover more territory. My little sisters were quite amused to teach and to watch me sweep. They kept saying, “*Nerna, Nerna!*” which is the Wolof word for “Good.” I was quite pleased with myself that I did the task correctly too.

Of course when I first arrived, it took me some time to understand certain familial norms. My host mom would serve me very large portions and it was always very difficult for me to finish the meals. After I spoke to the international program administrators, I explained to them that I personally felt very bad for leaving food in the plate and that I was not accustomed to eating such big portions. It was obvious that my host mom was simply trying to be a good host and she wanted me to be well fed, but I decided to explain the situation to her and she was very comprehensive. She told me that it wouldn't offend her if I left food on my plate, but she agreed to serve me smaller portions so that I wouldn't feel guilty. I am so thankful that my mom understood my reasoning and decided to adjust my portions.

In addition, my host mom has asked me to always walk in groups at night or to at least be accompanied by a man. She has insisted that I don't eat in vending posts and that I ignore aggressive strangers, particularly men, in the streets. She reminds me that I must be very careful when going to the beach because the waves are strong. I felt it was necessary to mention her recommendations in my post because students need to understand that our host families have genuine concern for our safety. They understand the culture and the setting far better than us foreigners. They want us to have a great experience in their country, but they also want us to be safe. I personally agree with my host mom's advice because I want to ensure that I can look back at this experience with good memories. With that being said, remember your resources! When you feel that you simply don't understand certain cultural norms, speak to the program administrators and have them explain to you the system of their society.

One of the greatest things of having the opportunity to be abroad in Senegal is that I am getting to live with a host family. There is only so much that Orientation and cultural courses can teach you and prepare you for, but when you actually have the opportunity to interact in a home, you learn to become more interactive and more present in their way of life. You learn to understand and to communicate things differently. It also allows you to realize that your study abroad journey isn't just your personal experience, but also an experience for your host family.