

## EXPERIENCE—KIMBERLY MITCHELL, LONG BEACH, CALIF. BECOMING A FIRST-CLASS INDIVIDUAL

**While studying in Italy for a year, Kimberly Mitchell, 18, realizes that her challenges are a source of growth.**

In summer 1998, I went on a tour of Europe for 16 days with my high school. In addition to seeing Greece, France, Switzerland and England, we made a stop in Italy. It was love at first sight. I had never seen such a beautiful place in my life. Not only was it beautiful, but the people I met there had the warmest hearts you could ever find. When I returned to Long Beach, I dreamt of living in Italy, marrying an Italian and growing wine grapes on a vineyard in the hills of Tuscany.

That September, I started my junior year of high school. I remembered the year before my friend had tried to go to Germany through a program called AFS, so I asked for information on the program from my counselor. It was discouraging at first because my counselor could say nothing but “It’s going to be difficult going in your last year of high school. You may not be able to graduate in time.” After that, the idea was abandoned because I didn’t want to complicate my life. Junior year is already the most stressful year of high school and I couldn’t imagine doubling the anxiety.

I went home and chanted Nam-myoho-renge-kyo; I chanted my heart out. My parents still marvel at how much I chanted. I thought: “If this is something I want to do, I have to put my all into it. I can’t just give up.”

I decided to ask my parents for advice. The first response I got was, as usual, discouraging. I don’t think they took me seriously. But I wouldn’t give up.

By November, I rearranged my schedule with my counselor in order to go to Italy and graduate on time, my parents started to take me seriously. We had made an agreement that I could go only if I took on a job to help pay for it. Before they could say the word *job*, I was on the phone arranging two babysitting jobs. School also became really difficult. I was taking 14 classes throughout the course of the day. I started getting some serious migraines that year, but it wasn’t about to make me lazy. I continued to also participate in clubs, keep my grades up, look into universities and have a social life with my friends. I had my doubts that I could do it, but that year made me a believer in myself. It made me believe that I could do just about anything if I was really determined.

After all these struggles, I thought I was going to have an awesome year abroad. I worked so hard to get there, it had to be good. The struggles, I can tell you from experience, will never stop. But that isn’t necessarily a bad thing.

So I went to Italy with these false ideas in my head. I figured that it was going to be a breeze and never really thought how difficult it might be. In the course of a year, I lived with three host families. One treated me like a hotel guest instead of a family member; one had a daughter with psychological problems; and one whose mother put on a façade, acting like she loved me in public only to impress her colleagues.

As I changed families, I also lived in three different cities. The first was Potenza, a newly built city with no real Italian characteristics. The second was Pietragalla, a village of 3,500 people in the countryside outside of Potenza. And the last was Naples, a metropolis that reminded me of a miniature New York City. I experienced three totally

different realities in Italy in the course of a year. It was very stressful and I felt homesick, and I was constantly on the phone with my parents and sister crying and complaining about my problems, which ended up being a benefit in disguise because I really deepened the relationship I have with them. But I also really deepened my relationship with the Gohonzon. Constantly hearing my mother say, “Do gongyo, do gongyo,” I finally got into gear and started practicing Buddhism on a regular basis. This really helped me keep my head on straight.

In the midst of all the chaos, I found a diamond—my boy-friend, Pasquale Antezza, whom I met in October. He is one of the most amazing people in my life. I introduced him to Buddhism and he is actively practicing and attending meetings in Italy. He proved to be a key person in my life while in Italy because he knew me, but he also knew Italians. He taught me that I can’t look at an aspect of Italian life and say: “That’s weird. It’s so different from the way Americans do things.” I did that even if I didn’t like to admit it. Instead of coming to Italy to learn and take in the culture, I ended up pointing out the differences to the Italians. What I needed to do was to become Italian for a year. Even if there are things that I didn’t agree with, I had to accept them because I chose to go there.

Cultures are different and that is a fact of life. There are even differences between the culture of Long Beach and San Francisco and there is only a car ride between us. This was the most important lesson I learned in Italy.

This brings me to today. While in Italy, I remember thinking that I wasn’t getting anything from the experience. I would pray desperately, thinking: “When is this going to stop? Just cut me a little slack.” But I realized that all those problems were really my benefit. I realized no matter how wonderful life could be, there will always be challenges.

These problems prepared me for problems that I’m sure to face in the future. I always felt so grown-up when I was younger, but I now realize that I won’t have someone there to take over every time things get out of hand. I have matured. I know I’ll have to bite the bullet and go through it but go through it with the determination to take the best of what I can out of that situation. This is what will make me stronger. Although I had some pretty difficult relationships with my host families, I really appreciate them because I wouldn’t be who I am today without them. I chant for them every day to find happiness.

Now that I’m home, I plan to use everything that I learned over this past year to fulfill my dream of attending Soka University of America, Aliso Viejo. I want to become a diplomat and use my knowledge of the Italian language.

SGI President Ikeda says: “There is no person who has ever achieved first-class standing in his or her given field merely on innate talent or favorable circumstances alone. It is the number of life-and-death struggles a person has experienced that forges and creates an individual of genuine first-class standing” (*Guidance Today*, vol. 2, p. 326). If that’s what it takes to become a first-class diplomat, I think I got a pretty good head start.