

Ruth Ann Gillis ES'71 IT'04P: Discovering Cultural Vibrancy



As a junior high school student, Ruth Ann Gillis was excelling in Spanish, so when her parents came across a *New York Times* article reporting that School Boys Abroad would begin admitting female students in 1970, it seemed like an ideal opportunity for their daughter. “I thought it was a great idea, too,” recalls Gillis.

The fact that she would be among the first girls to enter the program was viewed as a sign of progress. “I

realized that it was important. But at the same time, I was aware that it was among many ‘firsts’ for the women of my generation,” says Gillis.

Gillis’s placement with the Baiges, her host family, provided a rare glimpse into Spanish culture and history. “My host father, Juan, was a veteran of the Spanish Civil War, although I was never sure whether he fought as a communist or as a socialist,” she recalls. “He often talked about that conflict and it just seemed that he had many broken dreams due to the fascist victory in his country.”

Gillis has fond memories of her host mother, Carmen, introducing her to regional Spanish cuisine, including the seafood classic known as *paella*. She became close friends with her host family’s daughter, also Carmen, whom she accompanied to local discos and parties.

It was Carmen and her Catalan classmates who introduced Gillis to a stark reality of life in Barcelona: dissatisfaction with the fascist regime of Generalissimo Franco, Spain’s dictator. “The tension was obvious,” says Gillis. “The road signs were in Spanish and you couldn’t speak Catalan in public. There were civil guards on nearly every street corner carrying machine guns.”

She continues: “But the students voiced more frustration with the lack of modernization than with the military rule. There was a sense that Spain was falling behind more-progressive European nations.”

One of the program’s most admired teachers, Ángel Vilalta, also expressed concerns about Spain’s political climate. “He shared with us his disappointment about the endurance of the fascist regime and his hopes for a time when the fascists would not be running the government,” says Gillis.

Despite the political realities, Gillis enjoyed the positive aspects of Spanish culture and society. “I loved the arts,” she says. “Thanks to SYA, we took tours to cities like Toledo, where we viewed many of El Greco’s works — I remember that the blue in the skies of his paintings was the same blue of the Toledo skies, while the long, emaciated faces that he depicted were haunting.” She also admired the art of other Spanish greats, such as Picasso and Goya.

Gillis noted that both she and her classmates were greatly influenced by SYA teacher Vilalta’s views on the importance of cultural achievement. “He showed us that the vibrancy of any culture is measured by the vibrancy of the arts,” says Gillis.

Gillis cherishes specific memories of her time in Barcelona. “Every morning, my school bus would pass Gaudí’s Cathedral, which features unusual sculptural elements by one of Spain’s greatest architects. I can still see the sparkling sunlight of the Mediterranean shining behind this incredible example of Barcelonan architecture.”

She also practices much of what she took from her SYA Spain experience. “I learned many things while in Barcelona,” she says. “I learned to embrace diversity, to see change as an opportunity and to listen.”

Today, Gillis puts these well-learned lessons into play in her roles as executive vice president and chief administrative and diversity officer of Exelon Corporation and as president of Exelon Business Services Company, a leading U.S. energy provider.

“As a business professional, I’ve come to especially appreciate what SYA taught me about diversity — that it should be sought, rather than shunned. There is no doubt that the language, cultural and life experience that I gained in Spain was beyond formative for me,” she says.