In 1972, 10 Kent State architecture students accompanied by faculty members traveled to Florence, Italy, to study for a few weeks. They didn’t have a building for classes or a formal academic program to guide them. No Kent State University faculty or staff members lived in the city. Yet, the impact of learning in the birthplace of the Renaissance was undeniable. Perhaps without realizing it, these students and their professors set in motion an illustrious Kent State tradition of studying abroad in Florence that would endure and flourish in the decades to come.

“Kent State’s Florence study abroad offerings of today stem from its architecture study abroad program launched in 1972,” says Mark Mistur, AIA, dean of Kent State’s College of Architecture and Environmental Design. “One of the first of its kind, it featured a partnership with Superstudio, an Italian architecture firm known as a major leader of the Radical Design movement of the late 1960s.”

For many years, the programming available in Italy was solely geared toward architecture students. An article from the March 11, 1976, Daily Kent Stater notes that a group of about 44 fourth-year architecture students and faculty members would spend the spring quarter in Florence—a more than 300% jump in participation in four years. At the time, round-trip travel for an entire quarter in Florence was $700 per person, which included airfare, a two-month student Eurail Pass, accommodations in Rome and a one-week trip to Greece, among other transportation costs.

Growth continued as the program began to welcome more disciplines, including interior design, fashion and art history. By the early 2000s, it was evident that Kent State needed a dedicated space of its own in Florence. The university acquired the ancient Palazzo dei Cerchi in 2003 and oversaw the renovation of the building, which was built around the end of the 13th century and beginning of the 14th. While the interior was updated to serve the needs of Kent State students studying abroad, the exterior facade was maintained in its original state.

Kent State University reflects on its study abroad history in Florence, Italy, and looks toward the future as it celebrates the 50th anniversary of its flagship education abroad program.

By Bethany Sava, BS ’72

Above: A view of Florence at sunset, with the dome of the Florence Cathedral (Santa Maria del Fiore) at right and the tower (Torre di Arnolfo) of the Palazzo Vecchio at left. Photo by Bob Christy, BA ’95, MA ’22
offering visitors and passersby a glimpse of Florence from the 1200s. Located in the heart of the city, steps away from the Piazza della Signoria, Palazzo dei Cerchi was Kent State’s headquarters in Florence from 2004 through 2015. The programs available in Florence continued to expand to other majors and increase in popularity. In 2012, the university purchased an additional building, the Palazzo Barboloni Baldelli, to accommodate the growing number of students. In 2016, the university relocated to its current home, Palazzo Vettori. The 15th century building and its courtyard provide more space for classrooms and social activities. It is located across from Santa Maria del Fiore, the iconic Florentine cathedral situated in the city center. “Now in Florence we offer over 90 courses every year,” says Marcello Fantoni, PhD, vice president for global education and former director of the Kent State University Florence Center (2005-2012). “We have four different terms: a fall and spring semester and two summer terms. It has become a home for not only Kent State in its entirety, but it also serves as a big umbrella under which other international universities are starting to join us.”

Forty years after those first 10 architecture students studied in the city, the Kent State University Florence Center is the university’s flagship study abroad and international center. Before the pandemic began in 2020, it was home to 800 students a year, and interest in the program continues to rebound. During the 2022-23 academic year, the Florence program is set to host approximately 600 students who come from all colleges and campuses within the university system, as well as faculty members who come to Florence to teach.

“Florence continues to give Kent State students the opportunity to study in an international environment, grow as individuals and professionals, explore alternatives and collect memories they will cherish forever,” says Fabrizio Ricciardelli, PhD, who directs the Kent State University Florence Center and also teaches history courses, mostly on the Renaissance. “Being here in Florence means touching history. I always teach on-site when possible. So wherever we go with the students we have the chance to discuss works of art, masterpieces and history sources.” Most recently, students majoring in public health, nursing, fashion, education and several other disciplines participated in the Kent State Florence Summer Institute and the Kent State University Florence Health Institute, each for a term of four weeks. While there, they engaged with the community through planned academic opportunities related to their majors, such as student teaching experiences in elementary, middle and high schools; tours of local hospitals; and visits to museums.

For junior Andrew Priest, who is majoring in integrated language arts and plans to teach English in Japan someday, getting to work in a classroom setting with elementary students has been a rewarding experience. “In that elementary class, there are Ukrainian students who are obviously a bit separated from the rest of the classmates,” says Priest. “They’re refugees, and they don’t speak Italian, they don’t speak English. There’s a double language barrier between us. I was paired with them a lot, and I made it my mission to Google translate Ukrainian phrases and to the best of my ability, communicate with them.” It was a challenge, and the Ukrainian students were hesitant to engage. He could tell they understood him based on their behavior, but they didn’t verbally respond. But Priest continued to work with them and, finally, he was rewarded with a single word uttered by a little girl as she was drawing a picture. “I told her I thought she was talented at art,” he says. “And she responded, ‘Yes’ in Ukrainian.”

While professors may lecture about the challenges of communicating across cultures, Priest and other students studying abroad face those challenges firsthand and find solutions to overcome them in real time with real people. And, while studying in Florence, Kent State students are able to travel to other European countries easily and relatively cheaply. Such exposure to many different cultures increases the value of their international experience.
“In my opinion, it creates a sense of belonging,” says Nicoletta Peluffo, Italian language and education program coordinator at Kent State University Florence. “They all belong to Florence because they all conducted their experience here together, even though they come from many different colleges.”

As the university looks to the future, its focus is on making global education accessible to every student regardless of their financial circumstances through the recently established Kent State Global Education Endowment (see page 14). Often, students are unable to participate because of the cost associated with studying abroad. By removing or reducing that hurdle, more students can benefit from these life-changing experiences.

Learn more about the Kent State University Florence Center at www.kent.edu/Florence.

College provides the opportunity to explore interests and find your purpose, but not everyone follows the same path to get there. Emily Radebaugh, from Sylvania, Ohio, had dropped out of other colleges twice and was working 60-hour weeks at a warehouse when she decided to go back to school at age 22.

“I knew deep in my heart that I couldn’t continue to work in a place where I was so unhappy,” she says. “After I decided to go back to school, I flipped around the warehouse informing anyone who would listen about my plans to become a history professor.”

Most people at the warehouse were happy for her, but one man she had never spoken to before reacted in a way she will never forget. “He laughed in my face,” Radebaugh says. “He said, ‘No one would take you seriously as a professor. You talk with your hands so much you should do sign language.’

“Florence offered me the richest educational experiences I could have ever dreamed of.”

“I was taken aback by how boldly he made fun of me, but I took what he said to heart. I started researching American Sign Language and took it to immediately. I was deeply drawn to ASL. Deaf culture and eventually Deaf education, rights, community and history.

At Kent State, she tried programs in interpreting and Deaf education before deciding to major in ASL through the Italian Deaf community for a course studying abroad in Florence. The opportunities and experiences Radebaugh had while studying in Florence were made possible by several scholarships, including the Gary L. and Katy Dix-Brahler Endowed Study Abroad Scholarship and the Fern E. Welling Scholarship Fund.

“Florence offered me the richest educational opportunities I could have ever dreamed of, and I’m extremely grateful,” she says. “I loved experiencing a new culture and language. I felt the more I stepped out of my comfort zone, the more I grew as a person. I’ve grown in living with other people, and I’ve grown in confidence.”

Learn about the ASL program at Kent State at www.kent.edu/mcls/ba-american-sign-language.