

50 YEARS OF FLORENCE

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

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 '12

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, ▶

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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 Bartolini 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."

Fifty 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

Right: Clockwise from top: An interior view of the Siena Cathedral (Duomo di Siena), which Kent State students in the Florence program visited on a field trip in summer 2022. In the foreground is a marble mosaic floor panel, *Massacre of the Innocents*, by Matteo di Giovanni circa 1481. | A Kent State student sits in the lobby of Palazzo Vettori, the home base of the Kent State University Florence Center. | Palazzo Vettori is a 15th century building located across from the Florence Cathedral in the city center. | Fabrizio Ricciardelli, PhD, director of the Kent State University Florence Center, talks with Kent State students taking his course *Florence: The Myth of a City*. They are gathered on the Piazza del Duomo in the center of Florence; behind him is Santa Maria del Fiore, the cathedral of Florence. *Photos by Bob Christy, BA '95, MA '22*

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. It's given him the opportunity to practice navigating language barriers, including some rather unexpected ones.

"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.

But Florence serves as their base, their home away from home. The city, rich in culture, history and art, provides a captivating backdrop for their studies. And the dedicated Kent State faculty and staff who live in Florence provide comprehensive support for the students during their time there.

Studying in Florence with a small group of classmates is a transformative experience that leaves a strong impression and creates special memories and lasting friendships. ➤





Above: Linda Spurlock, MA '92, PhD '01, associate professor of anthropology at Kent State, introduces students to skulls while teaching her course Faces: Human Head Anatomy with a Forensic Art Focus at the Palazzo Vettori in summer 2022. **Right:** Fabio Corsini, PhD, talks with Kent State students at Florence's Central Market for his course Food Cultures: Biodiversity and Cultural Diversity, From Slow Food to Eataly. | KSU students enrolled in a Teaching English as a Foreign Language course taught by Nicoletta Peluffo, PhD, [kneeling] respond as children sing a song at Primaria Cairolì, an elementary school in Florence.

"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."

In 2022, Kent State celebrated half a century of studying abroad in Florence. Over the five decades, countless individuals have benefited from an immersive educational experience in the cradle of the Renaissance, an experience that not only enriches the lives of the students who go but also can benefit their friends, families and co-workers when they return.

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.



Stepping Out of Her Comfort Zone

The path to finding her purpose led one nontraditional student to Kent State, where a study abroad opportunity provided new perspectives and bolstered her confidence.

BY LINDSEY VLASIC, BA '22



Above: Emily Radebaugh poses outside the Florence Cathedral (Santa Maria del Fiore) in the Piazza del Duomo.

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 flitted 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 to it 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 modern and classical languages department in the College of Arts and Sciences. "It was kind of a journey to get where I am now," says Radebaugh, who plans to graduate in May 2023. "But I enjoy what I do and have never thought of leaving the ASL umbrella." Active on the Kent Campus, she is president of the Deaf Access and Allyship Organization.

In summer 2022, she traveled to Florence, Italy, for a study abroad experience. As an ASL major with a minor in Italian studies, Radebaugh focused on those topics, discussing them with her professors in each course she took. She gave a presentation on Italian Sign Language and Italian Deaf culture for an intercultural communications course, studied how emotions and culture impact facial expressions (a core linguistic part of sign language) for a psychology course and explored the LGBTQ community in Florence and its intersectionality with the Italian Deaf community for a course combining LGBTQ studies and peace and conflict studies.

Radebaugh used her breaks between classes to immerse herself in the culture and explore sign language programs she had researched prior to her trip. On a class trip to Florence's sister city Siena, during a two-hour lunch break she visited the Siena School for Liberal Arts, which has a Deaf studies program with courses in Italian Sign Language and Italian Deaf Culture & History.

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.