

SE04EP02

Lifelong Friends: Spain Twins

Kristina Escudero and Paul Harrington

Hannah (H): Welcome to Noles Abroad, a podcast by Florida State University International Programs! I'm Hannah

Zoë (Z): And I'm Zoe! And we are your hosts. On this podcast we'll talk about study abroad from the perspective of the students, faculty, staff, and alumni who make it an experience worth sharing. We'll also bring you travel tips and fun facts from around the globe.

Z: On today's episode we talked to Kristina Escudero and Paul Harrington, FSU alumni who met in Spain in 2012 and have been friends ever since. The two studied abroad together, both returned to Valencia as Program Assistants, and then went back to Spain to teach English and eventually pursue master's degrees. Let's go to our conversation with Paul and Kristina now.

Z: Hi Paul and Christina, how are you doing today?

Kristina (K): Great!

Paul (P): Good! How are you doing?

Z: Good, doing well. So, to start off can you both introduce yourself to our listeners? Paul we'll start with you.

P: Sure, yes. My name is Paul Harrington and I graduated FSU in 2013. I double majored so I studied Spanish and also I got a BA in theater as well. And as far as study abroad goes, I studied abroad in Valencia, well I guess we did. And right now I am the Assistant Director at a language school here in Tampa called Tampa Language Center.

K: And my name is Kristina Escudero. I graduated from FSU in August 2013 and I got my degree in International Relations and Spanish. And like Paul, I studied abroad in Valencia, Spain for Spring 2012 and Spring 2013. And I currently am the Program Officer for Global Jax. It's located in Jacksonville, FL and it's an organization that coordinates professional international exchanges.

H: What drew each of you to Spain? This time Kristina, we'll start with you.

K: So I was drawn to Spain - really it stems from language first. I grew up with a best friend, who is still my best friend and actually someone who joined us in Madrid later on, whose family is from Mexico. Her mom is from Mexico and she was our Spanish teacher in middle school. And so I grew up just constantly hearing Spanish and loving it and wanting to know more. So right off the bat I was excited to learn and it's just such a positive learning environment I had with Spanish and the language. So in high school I saw that there was an exchange to San Sebastian in Spain, but my parents never really allowed me to go at that age so I just held out hope and I really you know told them, I was pretty clear, 'I want to go to Spain when I'm old enough, in college at FSU I really want to make it happen and I want to go there to really be immersed and learn the language even further.' So that was just kind of a dream that started from there.

H: And what about you Paul? What drew you to Spain?

P: So its kind of a long story too but essentially I had gone and visited Spain with my family back when I was 14. My dad was working abroad and instead of coming all the way across the world pretty much to Tampa we decided to meet in the middle. So we went to the North of Spain to Asturias and Bilbao and, which is really beautiful by the way, and I loved it there. So you know I think I always had that in the back of my mind. And when I was there I couldn't really speak that much Spanish, despite the fact that I'm half Puerto Rican. So I learned Spanish in high school and then as I mentioned I double majored. So when I knew I wanted to study abroad but I had to choose, I was like I could go to London and do the theater abroad or I could go somewhere else like Panama or Valencia and go towards Spanish. And at that point, that's when I pretty much decided, I mean I think I was already leaning towards it but I decided to you know that I was going to be going for Spanish and language more than for theater. So since I knew I loved Spain and I love Spanish and language it kind of became the obvious choice, so that's pretty much why I decided to go there.

Z: Wonderful! So you both met when you studied abroad, I think, is that right?

P: Technically no!

K: We figured out that we actually met each other in just I think the FSU gym, we were playing volleyball and it was just kind of like pick up volleyball. Because I when I arrived to Spain and saw his face and I was like that guy looks familiar, I definitely played volleyball with him, just one day on the courts in the gym. So we kind of made that connection.

P: And she has a better memory than I do so she brought it up first and I was like 'Did we? Oh oh, yeah we did!' But we actually got to know each other for real in Valencia. That's like, that's when it all started for real.

Z: Okay awesome, well that's so cool, what a cool story. So can you just tell us a little bit more about that? Like how did you start to get to know each other and become close?

K: I'll start really quickly. I mean we you know really didn't we were really grateful to meet a lot of different people in our 2012 group in the Spring and we actually really got even closer honestly in the Spring 2013 year when we became Program Assistants. And this is something that Paul and I have talked about is that I think the beauty of study abroad sometimes is that you know you get a new family you didn't anticipate but even when you return home from the experience, I mean really it started, Paul and I were close and we knew each other and we had fun together in 2012 in our in our spring semester but we really got even closer when we returned home to Tallahassee and went through the application process of Program Assistants and then then becoming Program Assistants.

P: Yeah and also I think adding on to that, we also shared that experience of coming back from Spain. You know which you'd be surprised, everybody talks about the culture shock and dealing with like getting there. I didn't actually deal with that at all, for me it was harder to come back you know and to like deal with the differences. And I think that sometimes, you know, it's nice you know somebody who, and a lot of people really, but she and I knew each other, and we really understood you know what it was like to be somewhere else and then be back here and then be looking forward to like maybe we can do it again. And we both got super lucky, I don't know how many people applied, I think we heard it was twenty-ish, I don't know. And they picked both of us for the same semester, so that was pretty cool.

K: Yah and I think the shared, I think once we got there in 2013 the shared job responsibilities and everything that went into that. And then the both shared gratitude that we had been given the opportunity to go back and actually be in Valencia again and have access to that language we loved learning and the cultural experiences, I think that just is such a unique bond that you make with someone. And it really, it really just depends on the semester sometimes there's more than one Program Assistant but it was just me and Paul.

P: Yes and it was actually pretty interesting because the, I think the first time we went in 2012 there were like 65 people and then the next time we went there were 85 people so it was pretty, it was pretty cool seeing that difference. And then also both of us knowing and loving Valencia so much, we had our favorite plazas, we had our favorite restaurants, which maybe we'll mention but La Utielana, and like and so we would be able to show all these other students these really awesome places. And she, Kristina and I we would always, I don't know like be like where, where should we go? Like where should we show somebody? You know, it was pretty fun.

H: Yeah it's great to be able to share that experience, and then I think also what you mentioned earlier about having someone when you go back or when you come back to Tallahassee to kind of like reacclimate - it just made me think, we've heard that sentiment before and I think a lot of it is like the things that you experience while you're studying abroad or the growth that you go through. It's just, it's so different to come back with someone who knew you in that space because you may have changed while you were abroad or you may have grown in certain ways that your friends who didn't study abroad won't understand. And so I think that's awesome that you both have been able to continue that and you both have been able to see each other grow through these multiple international experiences. So we'd love to hear a little bit more about that. So you told us that you were both Program Assistants back in Valencia, so can you tell us about what that next step was, y'all did not end your affair with Spain there, what happened next?

P: Absolutely not. So we - it's still not really fully done is it?

K: No, never done.

P: Never. No but we, so we studied abroad like we said and were Program Assistants in 2013 in spring and then we came back and finished up our degree that year, and I'm pretty sure you also finished in 2013, right Ktina?

K: Mhmm.

P: Yes, so the point is that the next year in 2014 we needed our Spain fix and we were talking with each other and with a couple other close friends, some of whom had studied abroad in Valencia with us, and we all decided to move to Madrid together. There's this program and we decided to go and teach English there pretty much together but different. I don't know, Kristina, if you want to add on.

K: Yeah there, you know I feel like our sentiment on being back home and then graduating there's, a lot of people do different things after they graduate, right? You can like take a gap year, you can start a job right off the bat, I think Paul and I and a couple of our friends really did still feel that drawback to Spain and just and you having that new experience again, an eye-opening experience, learning environment. We just wanted to keep going and we had researched ourselves and then talk to a couple of professors even at FSU, I can remember giving me the information for a program that we went through called the

Auxiliares de Conversación, which is a government program that the Spanish Ministry of Education actually places you in public schools across the country. And so we, thankfully, both got placed in Madrid...

P: We applied super early!

K: Yes, you have to rank your top areas and just hope that, you know, you along with your friends get placed in the same area. So we started off and moved back in 2014 and started working in schools. I was in a school in the South of the Madrid region in a town called Chinchón, a very small town, and Paul was at the exact opposite part of Madrid.

P: Yes, in Guadarrama. But it's funny because like we both had like to take a bus just in completely different directions but it was pretty much the exact same distance from the city of Madrid. And we all knew that we wanted to live right in the city and you know you can commute and then come back but you still have that like big city vibe, where you're living you know. So we both had that and I mean I think that's probably around then when we started calling each other 'Spain Twins' because like there's just this whole, everything was the same. Like it was the same semester in 2012, and then in 2013, and then in Madrid.

K: And I think another thing that really both of us connected on was when we decided to go, when we were you know making that decision do we want to go back and actually work and being in a working environment, we really wanted to continue our language studies, both Paul and I. I mean Paul has a great background, a familial background, with Spanish speakers in his family and I don't so I knew that like I needed to be immersed in a Spanish speaking environment to keep, you know, this level of Spanish up and I think we both shared that drive.

P: Absolutely, yes. And even though you know we learned so much and we spoke of good amount of Spanish, we answered a bunch of phone calls you know in a study abroad Valencia when we were Program Assistants, in Spanish sometimes, but you know...

K: Took people to the doctor, you know all of the fun stuff.

P: Definitely but you know going there for even more time you know, you're constantly learning, like about the language and about the culture. It's just really eye-opening to see that when, I mean study abroad the first time was so eye opening and you're like 'Oh my gosh like wow this is insane like I didn't realize all these things,' and for some reason that, I feel like in a way, that never went away. It didn't go away in study abroad the second time or in Madrid, so that was pretty cool.

Z: That's so incredible. I think that yeah, I just love that you said that it's an eye-opening experience. So many of our students talk about that and then you know obviously it set you both up to then keep going back to Spain which is just such an incredible and unique story I think, so I really love that.

P: Yeah and then it doesn't even really end, I mean so what I was there for four and a half years, in Madrid, and Kristina pretty much almost the same, right?

K: Yeah.

P: And so we after two years of working at those, in those little towns, we kind of had to make a choice because of the system that they have in place. So essentially you can't, if you're working through the

government, through that Auxiliares de Conversación, then you can't – oo I did the Spanish accent, sorry, it sometimes comes out! – de Conversación, and you can't stay in the same autonomous community...

K: For more than two years.

P: Yeah, for more than two years. So instead of like moving to another place and like going to the North of Spain or somewhere else - we couldn't choose Valencia because it wasn't an option, otherwise I think we would have gone to Valencia - but we decided to get Master's degrees. We kind of decided that on our own, and it just so happened to you know line up. Different universities, but both in Madrid and so that's kind of what the next step was.

K: Yeah. Yeah we had very, and I mean we could go into lengthy detail about that if you want, but I mean like that was another great moment for us in our friendship too, I think, because you know a lot of our friends who were who were there were still working in the public school system or private school system and kind of continuing that journey like three years on and we just walked right into another, outside of our comfort zone experience. Going into learning environments but with you know Spanish peers, not American peers, all taught in you know lessons taught in Spanish so that was just like a level up for both of us.

P: Definitely, yes. A lot of challenging moments and it was kind of cool though even though we had different degrees, different universities, we still you know we're doing an intensive Master's program so at the end of the day like we had a lot of homework to do so we would still hang out, go to cafes together, you know. I want to say what was it Bunny cafe or something or Bunny coffee, I think it's like a weird like –

K: It was a combo Spanish English like name of the café.

P: Yes, yes. So, we would go and we'd be like study buddies in a way and we both did really well. Actually, I don't know, like we both actually got our theses published which was pretty fun and cool.

H: That's amazing!

P: Yeah that was fun. I mean it was it was hard, it was a lot of work but it was so worth it.

Z: That's so cool. I love that you mentioned earlier that you call yourself 'Spain Twins' that you kind of have that going on, because it does sound like your journey has just been sort of parallel this whole time and yet still individual, so that's really incredible. And we want to hear a little bit more about that so how have you connected or continued your connection with each other throughout all of these experiences and beyond?

K: Yeah we've, I mean during the experiences we've done so much together. I think that once we finally got to a place where we were living in Madrid we, you know because during the Program Assistant year there's just so much work to be done and just so much, we were together constantly so. And experienced of course Fallas together, you know those two times in 2012 and 2013, the cultural festival in Valencia. We really made a point in Madrid, when we were living there, to revisit Fallas every single year so we made that kind of like our you know homage to study abroad and our times in Valencia. And it was nice because each year we would almost, in a way, take new friends who had never been there before and sometimes you know people would come over from the States and know that we would be going and we I don't know I think we both share that now we've been at least like four or five times now. And it's a

great, great cultural experience that we'll never, never forget. And you know we've traveled, we've been on road trips together, we've spent holidays together. We did a road trip to the South of France, North of Spain/South of France, for Christmas one year we didn't go home. So we've become essentially each other's families. And an one year in Madrid, Guill – sorry, my now husband – Guillermo, we invited Paul to his family's house and had a big New Year's celebration and you know we've just shared in all of those life memories together in Spain. And we've done so many things too, of course in Florida. Thankfully, we don't live too far apart from each other. He's in Tampa and I'm in Jacksonville so it works out.

P: Yeah and I mean like, and I felt so, it was so sweet that like I was you know I didn't have really family to spend New Year's with and stuff and the fact that you know I was invited by Kristina, and really her fiancé and his whole family, like to go celebrate with them. Like you know and then we have all these you know we call them Friendsgivings you know every year. You know you don't even have the choice to go will spend it with family because it's not like it's a holiday in other countries, right? So, we would always spend it with each other and so we definitely became more like, you know, we definitely have like a whole family. We even have still a WhatsApp group called Valencia with some of us in there and so we're always just like writing to each other about things that we're interested in or stupid, funny things, or when we're all going to go back to Valencia.

K: Yeah we just really share, I think Valencia for us is because I think back on it, and Paul and I didn't really you know take so many large trips to different places together like we really got to know each other and spent so much time, both in Valencia and in Madrid, just like because they were our homes. So, we did so many things exploring those two cities and you know we have all of those little inside things like oh, every time we go to Valencia we're going to that restaurant, La Utielana, like we're getting the cordero, we're getting the gambas al ajillo, we're getting all that

P: Oh the gambas al ajillo!

K: We're getting the same things and we take people there every single time, without fail. So those are the kind of things that we do and we share so yeah.

P: And so many people I think are like 'oh make the best out of study abroad like, go visit every single place all over Europe,' and I mean I did do that some and I thought it was awesome and great, but I also felt like it was so worth it staying as many weekends as we stayed in Valencia because there's so much to see, there's so much to explore, there's so much to really get to know in depth, instead of like on the surface. And I think we both shared that sentiment in a lot of ways. But we have like kept in touch here and I mean like we mentioned the New Year's Eve dinner with Kristina's now-husband, that was a nice way like I got to know his family a little bit and see them there in Spain and then they got married here, so that was pretty awesome.

K: Yeah, we got married in April 2019 and that was really great because, you know, Paul was a part of my wedding day and he was in my bridal party. And I actually also had one of one of my other good friends that you know, I have like a really core group of high school friends, but my college friends that were there, two of them were Paul and my friend Leen that I met while studying abroad so, and there were plenty there were so many other people at the wedding that studied abroad with us. So, it was honestly like a wonderful, little reunion of sorts of people that thankfully you know if you went to FSU a lot of people were in state so they were able to come to the wedding and it was before the pandemic too, so we got to have that wonderful experience all together. But it's just a testament to, really the friends you

make when you're studying abroad really do become family in our case, 100%. And it can happen for everyone.

P: Absolutely and you know like, Kristina has some really close friends who studied abroad in Valencia, who I know and love too, but I just you know don't talk to them as often and when I saw them at the wedding I was like 'oh my god, like how have you been?' like you know, 'I haven't seen you since FSU or in Valencia!' or something like that you know so it's always nice to make these connections with people who you really, sometimes you make friends with people from different backgrounds that you've kind of wouldn't expect. You know, it's not just your theater friends and your Spanish friends, you meet people and make friends with people, sometimes for life in our case, from just totally I don't know different backgrounds in some ways you know.

H: Absolutely, that's one of the best things about study abroad that we hear from people, is the lifelong friends that you make and y'all are such a great example of that, like it's true we truly mean it, we're not making this up, it happens.

P: It just sounds so tacky.

H: It can! Yeah it sounds a little cliché, a little cheesy but like y'all are proving that and it's so great that people are able to hear your story. But before we let you go we have one final question for you that I'm sure y'all have some great answers too, so we'll have each of you answer this question. But what advice do you have for students who are considering studying abroad? And Kristina, we'll start with you.

K: Yeah so before my role as Program Officer at Global Jax, actually I was working in the study abroad office in Jacksonville University so this is such a great question, I really like feel it to my core because I was always just close with students who were on the fence or really needed some encouragement or hadn't, no one they knew or in their family had taken a trip abroad before and they were very nervous about it. And so I would tell them honestly that you know trust that you won't be alone, you're going to have a great support system while you're there. I mean, Paul and I clearly can attest to the you know wonderful support system that FSU International Programs has especially we know Valencia, of course, but in each location, I'm sure. We had so many people that were there to support us, so you won't be alone. And if you're open, you know you will really forge connections and make second families. I think that there's so many people, like Paul who I went through this experience with, that know me in some of my happiest states and like you could even say like that's the true me. I don't know how else to put it like life will get you down, you come back into real life, you gotta readjust, you gotta get back on your feet, but I mean even though it seems like study abroad or traveling abroad was a dream like you were you know a happy, a happy and excited, and you know open person, when you're studying abroad, hopefully if you try to make the best of it. And that's something that you know, when you have people around you that share that same thing it's just, it's just amazing and it's wonderful to seek out. So, I try to tell students like they you know you maybe you're going on a program alone right now, you're by yourself choosing to do this but you won't be alone when you come back.

P: Yeah totally agree. Whew, that was such a great response, I'm a little like whoa...

K: I know, I've had it like prepared for like 3 years like saying that to students, like trust me.

P: Oh that's true yes you've been talking about this with a lot of people. But yeah, what advice for students who are considering it? Do it, is the advice. I mean all jokes aside, but kind of. I really think you

know it's just so and I know I said eye-opening and stuff but it can really change your perspective on life. And not only like linguistically, sure if you want me to talk your ear off about linguistics and how learning another language can actually change your perception on how some things are in real life and also perception of other people and cultures sure there's that aspect, and there's the growth as well that you really you see and you learn a lot, you make connections with people. And I think you really understand the world in a different way. And to me, that has actually positively influenced my relationships, my relationships with my new friends, with my old friends, with my family, like all of it. Like I think that you know doing something like studying abroad and putting yourself just outside of your comfort zone, possibly, you know it allows you to grow in a way that a lot of other experiences might not.

K: I was gonna, I was gonna say that that was you know one of the I actually came back from studying abroad and did a presentation for I think International Education Week and I did the presentation with my other friend I mentioned, Leen, and it was, just as Paul said, really the basis of the presentation was the benefits of stepping outside of your bubble and outside of your comfort zone. And so if you are open and you know you're patient with yourself too, I think that's a really important part, only good things will come when you step outside of that comfort zone and that bubble to study abroad or to you know go to that language exchange once you are there and interact with someone who speaks Spanish and you're speaking the language, their language, back to them. Only good things will come.

P: Yes, I totally agree with that. But honestly it really is just such an incredible way to grow and to put yourself forward in the world. Like right I did not anticipate when I decided to study abroad, you know that things would lead to where I am now, excuse me to where I am now. And so and I'm really happy with where I am right now and although like you know I am here as the Assistant Director at a language school so I love, I love this, I love language but I do hope to go back, and I am planning on going back to Spain, because you know sometimes - I don't know living abroad is the best part of life! And one other thing that I have as a piece of advice is that you know when you go to study abroad you obviously are going to be taking some classes and at least you know taking 12 credit hours, I think so that you're a full time student. But something that I didn't realize before I had studied abroad was that you're actually learning so much all the time outside of the classroom and even though it doesn't feel like a class or something, the amount of knowledge and experience that you gain from that class, or from that experience because honestly the city is your classroom in a way as well. So, in a way you know you're learning so much and it's just so much more than I think a lot of people realize. And I think in a lot of ways, for me anyways, that's some of that stuff or those are some of the lessons that I am never going to forget. You know whereas sometimes we go to college, we take college courses and you know next thing you know you took that exam and three years later you forgot about whatever that content was. I mean, hopefully I really don't think I forgot everything, I think I'm doing pretty well but the point is that it really teaches you so much that really sticks around in your mind and in the way that you behave and think so that's some advice that I have.

K: Yeah and I was just going to say that I think to summarize really, that Paul and I's lives have been changed completely by study abroad and I know that we will both have an everlasting connection to Spain itself. I am now married to a Spaniard so I definitely feel that intense bond and it's just, that would have never happened if I didn't go study abroad in Valencia in 2012 the first time so I'm just really cognizant of that and appreciative of that and what stepping outside of you know your comfort zone can do. It's just amazing.

P: Absolutely. Yes. I feel I think I could go on and on and on but I hope that answers your question.

H: Absolutely, that is all such great advice for students and I mean for anybody listening to this episode we have faculty and staff and family members, all of the things that you have said I'm sure will encourage people to either study abroad themselves or to encourage somebody to study abroad because the things that y'all have mentioned are things that we all want for ourselves and for the people around us to get those broader perspectives and to get to experience these types of things and it is absolutely great advice so thank you so much. But thank you for your time, thank you for being on this episode. This conversation has been so fun, y'all are delightful and just to hear about just your story and all of your adventures in Spain is just so fun and like I said hopefully inspiring for other students to go out and have an adventure of their own.

P: Absolutely and if they're lucky and they love it or if you are lucky and you love it, listener, you could even apply to be a Program Assistant through FSU and that's honestly such an awesome experience because it's something that you, you feel so accomplished doing that in a way. I talked to my family and they were like 'Okay Paul, you want to go back to Spain, find a way to go back to Spain because you're not getting two tickets on my end.' So you manage to get there on your own. And that also is just a great part of stepping forward and moving yourself forward in your world.

K: I know, I feel like we should give a shout out to Ignacio and Alicia for giving us the Program Assistant, for picking us for that. Because that really solidified so much between Paul and I that they just, I think they know but like if they listen to this hopefully it will bring a smile to their faces.

P: Yes, and Catalina!

K: Ys! I mean so many people, we could like, I love everyone at FSU Valencia.

P: Yes, absolutely. The teachers, everything. It's just you learn so much in so many different contexts. And so sorry we're just rambling and rambling.

Z: Oh no, you're fine. We love hearing about it and we love the staff at FSU Valencia as well so it's always great to hear that you know they they're loved.

P: Definitely.

Z: Well thank you so much, it has been such a pleasure talking with both of you, we've just loved hearing your story and about your friendship!

P: Well thank you, gracias a todos!

K: Thank you! It was a pleasure!

Z: Before we disembark, we have an IP travel tip for you!

Traveling is a great opportunity to learn a new language or brush up on your language skills! We recommend learning a few key words and phrases before you go abroad, as this will help you when you arrive. There are plenty of free apps you can download to start learning the language as well, or if you have a friend who speaks the language that you're wanting to learn you can practice with them.

H: When you arrive in country, don't be afraid to practice the phrases you've learned. Many locals will appreciate your desire to speak their language and sometimes will help you learn more! Studying abroad is also a great way to fulfill the language requirement for your major or work towards a language minor. We offer a variety of study abroad locations that offer language classes!

Z: Thanks to Kristina and Paul for talking with us, and thanks to each of you for listening!

H: This podcast is a production of FSU International Programs. The music for this podcast was composed by John Bartmann. Our logo was designed by Vanessa Guirey, who also does our sound engineering. Editing, transcription, and research is done by us, Hannah Meister and Zoë Crook.