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“If a picture paints 1,000 Words...: How I Would Photograph My  
International Experience?”

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## **Mexico City Told by: Los Chavvos de la Calle y el Metro**

A small, recycled white rectangular piece of ticket paper with finger stains on it. Orange-red stripes on both ends, one end with three green arrows in a row, the other end contains the word METRO. A strip of these metro tickets, each signed and scribbled on front and back with words of love, encouragement, advice, and memories. This was the most important thing I brought back with me from my trip to Mexico City, and if I took a picture of it, it would convey the importance of my study abroad experience last fall. For residents of Mexico City, the metro is the only safe and convenient form of transportation. Whether you are hearing impaired and selling “discos,” live on the street and are asking for spare change, or you are from Polanco, bringing an expensive bouquet of roses to your wife in a prominent neighborhood, everyone rides the metro. It is the only thing in the city which bridges the class divide, and for one portion of your day, you are caught up in the bustle of Chilango daily life.

The stories I have of the metro vary greatly. One day, I was waiting for the crowd during rush hour and I was herded on by the crowds around me. Suddenly I realized I had lost my shoe! “Mi zapato, mi zapato,” I found myself yelling like an idiot as the train started moving. I looked up and a man threw my shoe in through the window. As I giggled hysterically at the situation I was in, the people around me cheered and laughed. I always felt like, amidst the busy-ness of the city, people were always looking out for each other, as they looked out for me. And it didn’t matter that I was someone foreign and not one of them; the gap between classes and cultures was bridged on the train.

The station also showed the class make up of the city. As soon as you entered the station, you were greeted by a vendor or the ticket lady. For 2 pesos a ticket, the lines were miles long and it didn't matter if you were late to work or if you could hear the train leaving. Around me, people were dressed in school clothes, rags, or coats and ties. Books, CD's, donuts, and nail files were some of the hot commodities of last season. The blind floor sweeper often swept me into his heap of trash if I sat on the ground, and rarely did anyone make room for each other to get on the train. During rush hour there are separate sections for ladies and men, to avoid injuries, although large handbags, babies, and elbows are often weapons of choice for these feisty women.

I once saw a group of adolescent street kids take off their shirts and unroll a bundle of broken glass. They swung from the rails and rolled in the glass in order to collect a few pesos from the rest of the passengers so they could eat dinner that night. Their backs were covered in scars, some from the glass, the rest probably from lashes they received in their broken homes from drunken fathers and violent relatives.

The second portion of the metro ticket contains signatures and messages scrawled across the front and back. These signatures are from kids like the ones on the metro, who did anything they could for a couple of pesos. These tickets I was given hold the names of all of the boys I worked with every day. Each morning, I rode the metro to the most dangerous part of the city. There I worked as a counselor and intern at a shelter for boys who live on the streets. When I left, they gave me the most wonderful memento and souvenir from the city. Some put words and phrases I taught them in English, others wrote little poems and short anecdotes, others curse words in Spanish that they had taught me. The green and black ink covered the tickets, which are sitting in a box in my room

right now. They remind me of the boys I worked with and tried to help, and how much they helped me during my semester in the city. They bring back memories of frustration and angst and stress and happiness and success. They helped me understand a whole new culture of the city and helped me see a different side of the city.

The boys understood more about the social problems and the problems with the government, and what needs to be done, than anyone else I met in Mexico. Working with them allowed me to gain a different perspective on the place I studied abroad, and the gift they gave me signifies this perspective and experience. As a sociology major, it changed the way I learn in my classes and has influenced my ideas and connections. The organization I worked with also helped me see the positive solutions and negative consequences of both governmental and non-governmental action in the city.

My experiences in Mexico were invaluable, and many of these and what I learned in my stay abroad are encompassed in these metro tickets with messages on them. They represent a semester of hard work, people who impacted me, and my knowledge of real Mexican culture. A photograph of the tickets is what I would choose as the best representation of my experience abroad, and the photograph for this essay.