

Flashes of Light

MANY OF US HAVE MADE the transition from student abroad to educator abroad. There are countless rewards, but many challenges as well. Bugged down with administrative details, it can be easy to lose touch with the wonder of new experiences. Responsible for 100 people, your focus can narrow to the practical, and you begin to take for granted cultural details that used to shock and amaze you. I observed this pattern in previous faculty directors and I was determined not to fall into the same trap. And so it was that in the summer of 2001 I left some extra time to travel in Spain before my program began, to try to put some distance between myself and my frenetic U.S. schedule to get in touch with Spain on its own terms. I chose to return to Alicante, a place I had only briefly visited five years before as a student, to see firsthand Les Fogueres de Sant Joan.

After days of visiting beautiful and elaborate sculptures throughout the city, my practical mind and creative soul quailed at the thought of spending so much time on something that would disappear in a wisp of smoke. Intellectually, I understood the symbolism of the festival, of the bonfires that would consume the fogueres during the cremá, but emotionally something in me resisted. That changed the moment I stood in the Plaza del Ayuntamiento and watched the flames and fireworks reflected in the eyes of both locals and tourists, I came to the realization that in the end, it wasn't about destruction, but about renewal—an energy that came off the fire and infused the crowds with a life force to keep



them going for the next year, through all the nights, as they grew longer and longer. And this monumental illumination, a tradition for so many Spaniards, has provided me with many more modest flashes of light over the years, and helped me renew my focus on the heart of any meaningful experience abroad: the moments that spark a passion for learning and understanding in our students.

VIJA G. MENDELSON

Director of Academic Affairs and Assessment

Academic Programs International (API)
San Marcos, Texas

YOU'RE INVITED! We invite you to submit your photos along with a brief (approximately 200 words) description of why these images are important in your understanding of a person, place, idea, or incident from your experiences in international education. The photos could be of a simple moment on your home campus involving international students, a major event in an exotic location, or anything in between. The editors of *IE* will run selections on this page throughout the year. Please contact us for submission details at elainal@nafsa.org.