The Madres la Plaza de Mayo have marched for nearly 40 years in cities across Argentina to demand answers about the fate of their children and grandchildren, victims of political violence.

"I hope you have the courage to live your own life," the self-described "difficult old man" instructed a couple of dozen University of Oregon students and faculty gathered around him in Montevideo’s ornate Legislative Palace. Between sips of tea, Jose (Pepe) Mujica held court and offered tidbits of personal philosophy to the study-abroad cohort.

"It seems to me democracy has been kidnapped by money," said Mujica, an especially poignant comment given his own eclectic biography. Born poor, imprisoned by his country’s military dictatorship for more than a dozen years, and elected president of its democracy in 2009, Mujica’s political legacy includes legal marijuana, abortion, and same-sex marriage in Uruguay along with his notoriety for shunning fancy clothes, driving an old VW bug and donating most of his presidential salary to charity.

"The biggest mistake," he lectured our students (and us), "is confusing happiness with wealth."

"Pepe is a simple man, which is both good and bad," a Montevideo pharmacist later told one student, who followed up his experience with the former president by conducting
interviews about the popularity of the country’s new marijuana statute for an article comparing it with Oregon’s changed drug laws.

It was just another day in a study-abroad program, offered through Global Education Oregon, that included overnight bus rides to Argentina’s Mendoza wine country along with formal study of Spanish, human rights, and news reporting. "They entered here, and they took our hard disks," said Javier Matías Borelli as he showed us the trashed offices of his newspaper, *Tiempo Argentino*, in the Buenos Aires neighborhood of Palermo. Armed thugs had kicked staffers, and along with taking the newspaper’s archives, the invaders cut *Tiempo*’s internet and telephone connections, and ransacked the business office files. Nothing else was stolen. "It is an attempt to stifle our freedom of speech," said Borelli, an editor and president of the cooperative that publishes *Tiempo*. "They were aiming to destroy our ability to publish."

Despite the assault on its infrastructure, *Tiempo Argentino* managed to publish an extra the next day, a special edition detailing the attack. Police called to the scene by *Tiempo* staffers just stood by watching; they did not intervene and the authorities arrested no one.

For much of this summer, 22 University of Oregon students studied in South America, working on both journalism and human-rights issues. The focus of their reading and research was the relatively recent past: the plight of the *desaparecidos*, the thousands of people who were kidnapped, tortured, and discarded without mercy by the Argentine military dictatorship (with complicity from Washington) in the 1970s and ’80s during the country’s so-called Dirty War.

Students met the Madres la Plaza de Mayo, walking with the fearless women who for nearly 40 years have marched in cities across the country to demand answers about the fate of their children and grandchildren.

Argentina and Uruguay are ideal places to study human rights and journalism. The region’s recent past teaches us how quickly so-called national-security threats along with the suspensions of civil and political rights can devolve into state-sanctioned
Terrorism. It reminds us that the violation of anyone’s human rights — especially the right to think and speak freely — is an assault on us all, and one that wounds society in sometimes-unimaginable ways. For example, during the Dirty War kidnapped journalists were forced to write propaganda for the dictatorship from a newsroom in a clandestine torture chamber.

Interacting with Argentina’s vibrant human-rights community may have convinced our students that assaults on basic freedoms — including freedom of expression — were things of the past. That illusion ended when a *Tiempo* reporter spoke to one of our classes a couple of days after the attack. "They had clear intentions of destroying our newspaper," María José García Moreno told our students. And about the police response, or lack of response, she lamented: "The government is not doing anything. This is the saddest part."

Yet she and the rest of the staff were energized, the editions of the paper since the crisis started are vibrant, sales are increasing, and international outrage is fueling solidarity from journalists far from Argentina.

We are convinced these types of experiences remind our students that their own human rights are vulnerable, especially in this era of nativism and xenophobia back home.

We hope it teaches them the value and necessity of constantly demanding from governments the rights to which all citizens are entitled. We hope it strengthens their understanding of the interconnectedness of all peoples, of how their individual action has the potential to save lives, and that inaction essentially condones human-rights violations in far-off places and at home. And we hope it prepares them to fight for all of our rights after they graduate. As ex-President Mujica told us, "We need to think as a humanity, not as separate countries."

This is why study abroad programs, no matter how complicated the logistics, are crucial for American higher education. International travel and education are life-changing experiences, especially in programs that combine language study with serious, emotionally and intellectually challenging excursions.

"I am not afraid," García Moreno told our students as she worked on the next edition of
the newspaper, "I am furious." Such passion is an urgent contemporaneous lesson that is hard to replicate without a journey to a world far from the comforts of home.

Peter Laufer is a professor of journalism in the School of Journalism and Communication at the University of Oregon. Will Johnson teaches in the international-studies department and the Law School’s undergraduate legal-studies program, both at the University of Oregon.