Alum finds love abroad

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Marta Machio and Ben Hamawy (MBA ’04), pictured in Norway, met during a study abroad program in Copenhagen, Denmark. After traveling the world together, they married in 2009 and settled in New Orleans.

Marta Machio and Ben Hamawy (MBA ’04) say studying abroad can change lives. After all, it changed theirs.

“Where would I be without studying abroad?” Machio asks. “Definitely not here in New Orleans.”

For Machio, an instructor of Spanish and Portuguese at Tulane, and Hamawy, chief financial officer at Upward Health, it was a chance encounter during a study abroad trip in Copenhagen, Denmark, that brought them together, took them around Europe, and eventually landed them in New Orleans.

Originally from New York, Hamawy was working as an engineer when he decided to enroll in Tulane's MBA program. A seasoned traveler eager to continue globetrotting in grad school, he signed up to study at the Copenhagen Business School in Denmark through the Freeman School's partnership program.

Machio, meanwhile, had been studying translation in Copenhagen through the University of Granada's study abroad program. She had arrived from Sevilla, Spain, and had just completed her first of two semesters when Hamawy arrived.

"It was so serendipitous that we met," Machio says. "It was right after Christmas, and I had just come back from Spain. I was back earlier than most people, and I didn't know the code to access my floor of the dorm. Ben was one of the few who had already arrived at the dorm, and he was there to open the door for me."

That initial meeting led first to friendship and then to a serious relationship.

Living together as expats, the couple got to know one another in a charming new city. They lived on the same floor of the dormitory and shared common areas like the kitchen, frequently crossing paths. Soon they were cooking meals together and planning weekend getaways to Norway.

Experiencing new parts of the world together drew them closer, both to each other and to the other students in the program.

"It was great," Machio says. "All of these people from different countries brought a different flavor to the dorm. It was everything from their cooking to their sense of humor. Study abroad is all about having a different vision of the world and seeing how people in other parts of the world do things differently, and we definitely got that when we were living in the dorm."

When he looks back on his time in Copenhagen, Hamawy says it's the everyday experiences that stand out.

"A bunch of us would cook and have dinner together and we'd go buy groceries," Hamawy says. "We didn't have a car, but we did have a bike because Copenhagen is a big bike city. Strapping a case of beer to the back of a bicycle was a challenge, and it was certainly memorable."

When their time in Copenhagen came to an end, Machio and Hamawy weren't ready to part ways, so they devised a plan to prolong their time together. They decided

they would each enroll in a second study abroad program — this time in Paris.

“It was definitely a non-standard route,” Hamawy recalls. “I had to plead my case to the administrators at Tulane for why I should study abroad in a second country.”

In Paris, the pair picked up where they left off, exploring the city of love and squeezing in travel on the weekends. Though Machio originally planned to remain in Europe after completing her degree, she says that her relationship with Hamawy shifted her course.

“Things changed after we met,” she says. “We wanted to be together.”

After completing his degree, Hamawy was offered a job at Mignon Faget, a New Orleans jewelry designer, and for a time the couple was long distance.

“2004 was a year of visits to New Orleans and Spain,” says Machio. “We were back and forth every few months.”

Machio eventually enrolled in Southeastern Louisiana University’s Master of Education program with the goals of continuing her education and being closer to Hamawy. Not long after, the pair was engaged. When they married in 2009, they invited their study abroad friends.

“We invited our friends from all over the world to our wedding,” Machio says. “They went all the way back to our time in Copenhagen.”

Hamawy worked as chief financial officer for 10 years at Mignon Faget before becoming an independent financial consultant and then working as a regional chief financial officer at Humana. Machio, meanwhile, was hired as an instructor in Spanish and Portuguese at Tulane.

“We’ve come full circle” Machio says. “It’s a great story about how study abroad can bring people together.”

In the intervening years, New Orleans has become the couple’s permanent home. They’re raising two boys in the city and are preparing them for a life of adventures abroad.

“Our kids speak Spanish because of Marta, but they also speak French because they're in the French immersion schools here in New Orleans,” Hamawy says. “When

they get to be college-aged, we will definitely be encouraging study abroad.”

To students considering international travel, Machio and Hamawy have one word of advice: “Go.”

“Studying abroad opens so many doors,” Machio says. “You never know what it will bring into your life.”

“My advice to students is to do it,” Hamawy says. “You’ll be glad you did.”