

[Live, Learn Latin America Kody Gerkin MSU's Center for Latin American & Caribbean Studies]

[Why studying history & culture made a difference]

So yeah I think that really did begin here. I was studying international relations over at James Madison and I got really interested in Latin America. I studied Spanish a little bit in high school but I had no understanding of Latin America really other than the language in the little bit of culture that you get language courses at the secondary level. So when I came here, I started learning about the political systems in Latin America and to be quite honest you, I was learning about the role of the US government has played in various countries in Latin America in less than a positive way in the past and in Guatemala there was a 36 year long civil war and it's all but considered a genocide. There were mass slaughtering indigenous people helicopters, machine guns. And you know, the US did play a role in that early on and eventually withdrew their support and thanks to, in large part to a woman. No one should be surprised, Rigoberta Menchu writes a book about her story, wins the Nobel Prize and very quickly after that, enough press attention has been drawn to what's going on down there that they come to the table and sign a peace accords finally in 1996. So in my lifetime there's genocide against this group of people that Mujerave now exists to support. And that conflict has been particularly hard on women as well. They have lost children and spouses and parents and things like that. I started learning about all those things here. There is no way I could have gone to Peace Corps in Guatemala without the understanding that I developed of Latin America here. Taking courses at Michigan State in particularly with the Center for Latin American and Caribbean studies. The courses on government systems in Guatemala. Understanding proportional representation so you don't just vote for your candidate you vote for a party and that party has a list of people who then get into the government and the presidential elections if somebody doesn't win more than 50% plus one of the vote, then they go to a runoff election with the top two candidates. So the presidential elections are very similar to what's going on in the US, but there are also a lot more interesting when you understand those kinds of things, so being able to pick up a newspaper in chat with whomever, the cab drivers in the Central Park about the elections, I understand, there is going to be run-off, there is going to be a segunda vuelta, and that's going to have a certain amount of time and so you know understanding that things can get a little heated around election time. You gotta be ready for maybe some street protests. We definitely saw quite a bit of that in Guatemala over the past year. So having that understanding helps you living abroad also when you're living in Latin America you understand things that way.