“George’s Kids” Remember:

1965 IU Junior Year Abroad Alumni Reunite

By Linda Segall, freelance writer and 1965 IU Junior Year Abroad Participant

The Peru study abroad group, 1965

It wasn’t an ordinary reunion. When “George’s Kids”—an affectionate moniker of the 1965 IU Junior Year Abroad participants—assembled in Bloomington at the end of July 2015, they made their Golden Anniversary reunion special. There were no planned events to occupy them. Instead, on two successive evenings they gathered and talked until their voices were raspy. And then each paid homage to George Zucker, director of their program, and the year spent studying at the Universidad de San Marcos in Lima, Peru.

The original group was composed of 17 girls and three boys. Of that group, one—Jane (Browne) Bove—died in a tragic airline accident, and two cannot be located. The remaining 17, however, traveled from as far away as California and Puerto Rico to return to Bloomington, where their adventure began 50 years ago, to celebrate with George and his son Craig, who was a two-year-old in 1965. (Brother Eric, who was a baby during the year abroad, was unable to attend.)

As he looked at the group having dinner together, George, who in 1965 was an IU assistant professor of Spanish (and later became associate professor of Spanish at the University of Northern Iowa), repeated, “These people are my family. They are my ‘kids.’ I can’t believe it’s been 50 years!”

Although George and his wife Jane (who passed away in 2001) were only three or four years older than at least one student (and not more than five or six years older than the rest), the “kids” respected them if not as parental figures, then as sage advisors who helped guide them through the challenges of new cultural and educational experiences. As David Clapp, one of the three “boys” reflected, “George and Jane supported me, cared for me, and kept me from doing stupid things.”
One of the highlights of the reunion came after a catered dinner of Peruvian fare at the Engbers’, who hosted the reunion: Each of the group read a tribute to George. The collection of tributes was published in a hard-covered book and given to him as a thank-you for the year that changed everyone’s lives.

WinEllen Marcum’s comments encapsulated the feelings that permeated all of the tributes: “Peru was neither a beginning nor an end. It was an integral part of the equation of life. Without it, life definitely would have been much different.”

How different? For one thing, three marriages would not have occurred: Nancy Villalobos married her Peruvian “brother” Tito (the male in the family with whom she lived), a year after returning to IU to finish her degree. Mary Sugar, energized by the Peru experience, became a Fulbright Scholar, studied in Argentina, and met her Argentine husband there. Irene Melendez, a Valparaiso University student who participated in the IU program, planned to use her Spanish skills by spending the first year studying for her M.A. in social work at the University of Puerto Rico, but she met her Puerto Rican husband and never left the island. (She did become a social worker, however.)

The year also brought heightened social awareness. Linda Kelsey reflected, “I think the experience mostly served to reinforce my commitment—begun with the civil rights movement in this country—to human rights and social justice. Before Peru, I had never seen absolute poverty . . . When I read about rising economic inequality in this country, I ’see’ the affluent residents of Miraflores and San Isidro [suburbs in Lima] living behind high walls topped with broken glass.”

Sue Turner, who spent her career as a teacher, agreed that the year had a profound effect on her vision of the world. “Did it change my reaction to new ideas? To strange, new foods? To injustices, whether they were visited upon the indigenous and disenfranchised in Peru or upon those of different races or cultures in the U.S.? I don’t know who I would have been without that momentous year in Peru.”

Coleman Dirhan declared, “The experience set the tone for my life. I served in the Peace Corps, completed postgraduate studies in international business management, and pursued a successful career in international banking for more than 30 years. I can truly attribute my professional successes to my year in Peru.”

“When I interviewed for my job with Truman State University,” said Cheri Engber, “the president asked me
what effect my year in Peru had on me. I said, without hesitation, that it opened up the world to me.”

Gaining language proficiency and experiencing a new culture were underlying reasons for seven of the 17 who began their professional lives teaching Spanish (some later changed careers), as well as for others in academia and business. Five of the 1965 group eventually enjoyed careers in academia, two in social work, one in international business, and five in other occupations.

Mary Carr said, “My primary motive for participating was to improve my Spanish before starting my teaching career. Little did I know the year in Peru was going to do more for me than improve my Spanish. My experiences there expanded my view of the world and made me more accepting of different people, ideas, and cultures.”

Another “student,” Rita Marsh-Birch, who spent her career using her language skills as a teacher, a university professor of English as a second language, and an interpreter, declared, “Spanish has been a part of my life since ninth grade. Peru was the culmination.”

The Peru experience became an intricate part of some lives. Richard Lee said, “My experience in Peru has been interwoven into almost everything in my life. I taught Spanish as a career. After I retired I was asked to teach part-time and then to start a Spanish program at Ivy Tech—that lasted 14 years!”

A number of the group attribute their love of travel to the year abroad. “It instilled a love of travel,” said Diana Glad, “and although I have never been back to Lima, I have been to Chile about a dozen times, to Europe innumerable occasions, sometimes studying, sometimes teaching, but mostly because I like to travel.”

Like Diana, Sharon Sylvester said the Peru experience spurred a lifelong interest in travel. “My three children all studied abroad because I knew what a great experience it would be for them. Peru 1965 let me get out of Indiana and see the world.”

Everyone agreed that memories and friendships were an invaluable result of the year. Linda Segall stated, “As I was digitizing my slides from that year, I realized the legacy from Peru 1965 was not teaching Spanish, speaking the language, or returning to Peru. It was much simpler: the memories, made with friends who became family.”

Izora Harrison agreed: “I became part of a wonderful extended American family of 20 plus four [the Zuckers] and a kind and gently aging Peruvian family of two.”

The Peru 1965 “family” did not start having reunions until 25 years ago. It then began organizing itself every five years for reunions. The group now meets every two and half years, because they realize that age will take its inevitable toll on the group. The next reunion will be in Tampa in 2017.

How can the year abroad be summarized? Sherrie Hitchcock McKenna’s sentiments tell it all: “We were very fortunate to have chosen this experience, and so lucky that the university chose the Zuckers to be our guides.”

In addition to George and Craig (and Craig’s wife Kim), celebrating and reflecting on the year were:

Izora (White) Harrison, with her husband Bob
Cheri (Biddle) Engber, with husband Mike
Sue Turner, with husband Karl Karnaky
Mary (Mullins) Sugar, with husband Marcos
Diana Glad
David Clapp, with wife Bobbie
Sharon Goodnight Sylvester
WinEllen (Gruber) Marcum, with husband Howard
Sherrie Hitchcock McKenna, with husband Jon McKenna
Nancy (Jones) Villalobos
Linda (Jefferson) Segall, with husband Jim Cullipher
Linda (King) Kelsey, with husband Mike
Richard Lee, with wife Becky
Mary Carr
Rita Marsh-Birch, with husband Wade Birch
Coleman Dirhan
Irene (Gnemi) Melendez, with husband Marcelino