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How time flies. More than 19 years have passed since I was first employed by the Canadian Embassy in Buenos Aires as a resident of Argentina to represent Canada as a public affairs officer.

At the time, Canada had just joined the OAS and looked forward to establishing a public affairs program in many countries of the Americas, which would foster increased communication and partnerships in the region. Since I was born in South America and grew up in North America, the idea really appealed to me.

Because things generally evolve within or without the realm of organized diplomacy, we of course already had initial exchanges in the world of arts and academia. Our role as embassy staff was and is to do some careful weaving so that the tissue is stronger and the fabric is more beautiful to the eye.

To many Argentines, Canada was perceived as the North Pole, and to many Canadians, Argentina was the South Pole. The vast geographic distance between the two countries translated into an information vacuum. Our Canadian Studies programs therefore became to us super-railroads that eased our way into universities, NGOs and governments to create factual, enlightened, ever-growing and crucially important two-way information exchanges. My responsibility was to ensure that courses and academic initiatives included Canadian content, as well as to promote fellowships to and from Canada.

For my efforts in promoting Canadian studies, on May 29, 2008, the International Council for Canadian Studies had the kindness and generosity to award me a distinction of merit. When I first learned that I was to receive this recognition, I was left with a few questions that enabled me to draw some conclusions. First and foremost, I wondered why we put so much emphasis on Canada-based staff vs. locally engaged staff when we describe ourselves on forms and in manuals. I realized that there really shouldn't be a distinction. Both teams lean heavily on each other to generate the language and the tools required to go forward with our goals.

I also questioned the scarcity of our resources, which defies us to plan in straight lines when we keep running into peaks and valleys. But these constraints are tempered by the enviable doses of freedom that we are given and the opportunity we have to use our imagination as well as apply almost every facet of our education to develop necessary programs.

And finally, but not least of all, I realized that despite

Beatriz Ventura (right) receives a service award at the Canadian Embassy in Buenos Aires.



the fact that I am several thousand miles away, I see myself as the trusted representative of, say, an art cooperative in Trois-Rivières, a student in Saskatoon, a grandmother in Nunavut, an environmentalist in Prince Edward Island or an indigenous teacher in Hobbema. The same is also true when I am advancing the causes or the accomplishments of Atom Egoyan, Margaret Atwood or the late Terry Fox, as well as the Prime Minister and the Governor General of Canada.

I realize that I am helping Canada to promote its values and interests beyond its borders because, ultimately, they do find an immediate and sincere echo in Argentina and with Argentines.

To me, it is clear that my team and I are sort of a central agency, designed to help our trade and immigration colleagues and ensure that the ambassador and counsellors are well briefed for their dialogue with local society, which is a "coat of many colours." In Argentina, exhibitions and ballet performances and special dinners never begin before 9 p.m., so I am also a vitamin-taker and do not avoid life-saving caffeine. I have all the complaints: I'm often in need of a spa, my brain is sometimes frozen. Whatever. But would I have done anything else? I doubt it. I can clearly see my footprints on the ground I've covered. I've had fun. I've learned a lot. I've made a difference.