

# Our Year Abroad: A Love Story

Gaucho and EAP alumna, Joanne Pon Rubin '79, shares how her EAP experience changed her life forever.

By Pamela Bellew



45 Years Ago

It was the fall of 1977 and Joanne Pon, a junior at UC Santa Barbara at the time, had made a life-changing decision to apply to the UCSB Education Abroad Program. At the same time, 136 miles south of UCSB, in Irvine, Barry Rubin, also a junior enrolled at UC Irvine, had made the same, life-changing decision...to spend a year abroad in the United Kingdom with the UCEAP.

Neither Joanne nor Barry knew it at the time, but their desire to travel, to leave the comfort of their Southern California communities, and to expand their horizons and "see the world," would alter the direction of their lives forever. The impact of that decision to enroll in EAP would truly affect their lives for decades to come, well beyond the 1977-78 academic year in which they lived and studied at the University of Birmingham campus located in the suburb of Edgbaston, in Birmingham, England.

## Crying and a Box of Cookies

Joanne's first encounter with Barry was at LAX. Along with several other EAP participants, they were waiting in line to check their luggage, preparing to board the charter plane that would take the excited group of Southern California students to Europe, many of them for their very first time. Being the meticulous planner and rule-follower that she was, Joanne had ensured her bags would not exceed the maximum weight allowed for each passenger on the special charter flight - 44 pounds. As she knew it would, her bags did not go an ounce beyond the limit. She breathed a sigh of relief as she watched her luggage successfully loaded onto the belt and into the belly of the plane.

Behind her in the check-in line was Barry. As he tossed his large bags onto the scale, Joanne was both surprised and dismayed to hear his booming voice saying to the LAX personnel, "I have no idea how much my bags weigh!" Much to Joanne's chagrin, she watched as Barry's luggage - obviously weighing well-above the maximum limit of 44 pounds - was easily tossed on the loading belt. No questions asked. Joanne thought to herself, "Who is this guy? We're obviously complete opposites."

Soon thereafter, as they waited for the plane's departure following a 6-hour unexpected delay, Joanne noticed a lovely young woman whom she later learned was Barry's then-girlfriend (we'll



call her “Jennifer”) sitting on Barry’s lap. Jennifer was crying, loudly and noticeably, as Barry attempted to comfort her while they bid each other farewell knowing it would be a full year before they would meet again.

Ah, young love.

The box of cookies which the broken-hearted Jennifer gave to Barry as he boarded the plane would soon be distributed among the many excited and chatty EAP students as they made the 14-hour journey from Los Angeles to Bangor, Maine, then to Paris, and then to their final destination, London, England.

Little did Joanne and Barry know while cruising at 35,000 feet that their EAP adventure abroad in Birmingham would lead to a seven-year courtship, followed by marriage, two children, and a lifetime of travel and adventures.

### The Slide Show

Reflecting upon the myriad of experiences they shared, independently as well as together while in England, Joanne and Barry recognize, and deeply appreciate, the impact that EAP has had on their lives. In an interview in January 2022, they shared what motivated them to participate in the program, still in its infancy, 45 years ago.

For Joanne, her yearning for travel began with the “seed planted” by her parents when she was just a young girl. Memories of sitting on the living room floor of her childhood home, the old projector and drop-down screen pulled out of the closet again, and the endless Kodak slides featuring her parents’ 3-week trip to Europe are deeply ingrained. Many thoughts come to mind in which she and her siblings sat cross-legged on the rug, looking up at the white screen as her parents recounted detail after detail from that special, once-in-a-lifetime, European trip they went on...without their kids. With each photo converted to the now classic Kodak slide, ready for the projector with the round tray, the Pon children spent many evenings absorbing images and information, and essentially watching their parents relive their big trip over and over again.

Joanne’s older sister, Sue, was an American Field Service (AFS) student in Switzerland during her high school years, and ended up studying and teaching in Taiwan in college. Sue’s experience greatly influenced Joanne as well. “I realized the world was indeed much bigger than Torrance,” says Joanne.

When the opportunity presented itself to participate in the EAP as a student at UCSB, Joanne jumped at the chance. “I was ready for adventure and a new experience,” she said.

For Barry, whose family did very little traveling while he was growing up, and who had only been on an airplane (to Miami) once as a young boy, it was his fascination and affinity for European history and art that motivated him to apply.

“In the 1970s, traveling wasn’t easy,” says Barry. “It was a big deal,” he continues, “to go abroad at that time, and it was expensive too. The opportunity to pay about the same tuition for a year, receive transferable credits and stay on track for graduation while seeing other countries with the safety net of the UC system beneath you, well, that was tremendous...and just too good not to take

advantage of, if you could."

## Here Comes the Sun

When reflecting upon her fondest memories of that time, Joanne says, "I thoroughly enjoyed the culture of the UK including the pubs, words and terminology that were similar but different to American English (loo, jumper, tea), figuring out how to dress warmly and knowing that a clear sunny sky meant cold not warmth (mufflers/hats/gloves), negotiating the English dorm food menu (kippers, cold toast, scrambled powdered eggs) and reminiscing with other UC students about how delicious the UC dorm food was that we left behind. The awareness and joy of these cultural differences was due to the time we 'lived' there for a full year, rather than a short visit. I had to work through the challenges of the shorter winter days, and when spring came and the sun peaked out one day, I completely understood what the Beatles were inspired by in their song, Here Comes the Sun."

"At that time," says Barry, "going abroad was a completely immersive experience. There was no internet, no social media to post photos. You communicated with your family and friends back home through air mail and postcards. A package from home took nearly two weeks to arrive, and a phone call with your parents was, well, really rare."

-Barry Rubin '79 UC Irvine, EAP UK-England

## An Immersive Experience

Both Joanne and Barry have numerous stories and a plethora of impactful experiences from their EAP year abroad. Whether it was classes with British students taught by esteemed professors and scholars, or the efforts made to assimilate into British culture and make British friends as best they could, the effects of living and studying overseas during the late 1970s remains with them today.

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## Figuring Things Out

The arrival of Spring break in 1978 allowed for further opportunities for growth. Like many of their fellow EAP residents, Joanne and Barry opted to travel through Europe alone, visiting numerous spectacular and historical locations - as many as they could reach before returning to campus for the final quarter of their year abroad.

"I learned to be very independent," Joanne reflects, "to problem solve and be comfortable with myself. The anticipated experience of study abroad was to expose ourselves to opportunities outside our comfort zone. During spring break a lot of students traveled to the continent. I took off by train to visit Amsterdam, Paris, Switzerland, Italy and the south of France by myself. After those experiences, one gains confidence in approaching other projects and challenges. We had to learn how to be completely independent and figure things out. We were there a full year. We were no longer visitors."

As their personal confidence grew, so did the relationship between Joanne and Barry. Joanne recalls, "Barry and I found ourselves eating meals together, running for exercise, catching the local repertory theater performances, and taking weekend trips to explore other parts of England. We were complete opposites, but somehow it worked."

### Fabulous Human Beings

Even though their parents and closest California friends were an ocean away, Joanne and Barry recall that the EAP program had a sound base of support for the students. Both have memories of the warm welcome and important orientation the entire planeload of students received by the EAP "facilitators" upon landing in Paris. Once situated in England, the facilitators took the students on their first sightseeing tour, ensuring that all of the famous spots which they had heard so much about - Tower of London, the Crown Jewels, the Changing of the Guard, and so on - were visited.

"These were fabulous human beings," says Barry. "They were highly educated and scholarly, some were faculty from nearby institutions such as the London School of Economics. They were very generous, thoughtful, and well-suited for their roles. Probably over qualified. At the time, there was an EAP Office in London where our facilitators were based. They made a point to visit all of the Universities throughout the UK where EAP students were living at least twice a year. They hosted us for special dinners out, and holiday parties. They were really there for us if we needed anything."

Other unusual, once-in-a-lifetime opportunities presented themselves while abroad as well. For Joanne, it was being chosen as the only American student to be on the University of Birmingham's Ballroom Dance team. For Barry, it was a memorable afternoon shortly before his return to the States, when the American EAP young men (foolishly) challenged the



British Men's Rugby team to a traditional game of American Football. Needless to say, the Rugby players had difficulty altering techniques ingrained in them while playing Rugby. Those techniques and the rules for Rugby allowed for punching and kicking of their opponents, even once they hit the pitch. This was certainly not allowed in the rule books of American Football! In Football, for the most part, once the player with the ball was down, the play was basically over.

Barry vividly recalls waking up the following morning with numerous bumps and bruises, feeling extremely "beat up" by the Brits and their mates. A parting gift for the Americans and lasting impression for all, to be sure.

"My experience was so rich," says Joanne, "with the result of opening my eyes and having a more rounded, world perspective. I strongly believe that every student should have the opportunity for a study abroad experience, to have an opportunity to participate in another culture and to widen one's perspective."

– Joanne Pon Rubin '79, UCSB, EAP UK-England



## The Seed Planted

Following their adventurous year abroad, Joanne and Barry eventually returned home to Southern California and completed their senior year at UCSB and UCI, respectively. The friendship they had formed overseas, and the experiences they had with one another and with other foreign students, became the foundation for what would become a romantic relationship in the years to come.

Utilizing the free campus shuttle system (designed for UC students to travel to other UC campus libraries for research and study), Joanne and Barry found an innovative way to see one another. The free “trunk line” phones which were stationed in the common areas of resident halls allowed students to call one another from UC campus to UC campus as well. The line to use this phone was always long, but worth the wait for the young love birds.



The seed had indeed been planted for Joanne and Barry. Their desire to travel more, their sense of confidence, their curiosity about other cultures and the world beyond America, would only grow during their lifetimes. Most significantly, their love for one another would grow as well.



In 1985, more than 7 years after returning from their junior year abroad, after graduate school for Joanne and Barry’s return to a British graduate education in Cambridge, Joanne Pon would marry Barry Rubin. She would be known thereafter as Joanne Pon Rubin.

Thirty-seven years later in 2022, Joanne and Barry have two daughters, Emily (31) and Abby (21), and live in Long Beach. They continue to travel and explore the world, and even hosted a high school-age young man from China who lived in their home while he attended Long Beach Polytechnic High School.

“It was the best experience I had in my college career.”  
Joanne Pon Rubin

## The Best Experience

As generous and steady donors to the UCSB Education Abroad Program, Joanne and Barry recognize how fortunate they were to live and study abroad, and they want to help other young people have that same opportunity. “My experience was so rich,” says Joanne, “with the result of opening my eyes and having a more rounded, world perspective. I strongly believe that every student should have the opportunity for a study abroad experience, to experience another culture, and to widen one’s perspective. I always recommend to anyone who asks, take the opportunity to study abroad.” Joanne concludes, “It was the best experience I had in my college career.”