



## **ISH Alum Manuel Vergara Uses Law to Change the World**

By Barbara Slavin

When Syria's civil war finally ends and the country struggles to pick up the pieces, an alumnus of International Student House might well be among those helping Syrians draft a new constitution and other legal codes.

Manuel Vergara, who lived at ISH in the summer and fall of 2011, has made the rule of law his specialty as he has moved on from internships with the Spanish Embassy in Washington and UN Mission in New York to the UN tribunal for Rwanda, the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in Cambodia and the International Labor Organization office in Indonesia.

For the peripatetic 25-year-old Spaniard, of all the cities he has lived in over the past 18 months, "the two best ones have been Phnom Penh and Washington D.C.," he said in a recent Skype conversation from Jakarta.

Phnom Penh combined interesting work - research on the Cambodian penal code, monitoring trials and analyzing pre-trial detention practices - with "great colleagues, good friends, an easy life and a beautiful country," he said.

As for Washington, Vergara enjoyed his internship in the political section of the Spanish Embassy but a major reason he loved the city was because of ISH.

Although he was only at the Student House for 3 months, Vergara said his stay was "very intense" and that he had "the chance to talk to everyone there several times and to develop deep friendships."

Vergara had lived in the United States earlier - in a less cosmopolitan setting - Johnson City, population 60,000, in east Tennessee. There he attended high school, perfected his English and developed a good understanding of southern American culture, he said.

Washington was something different. While he made new American friends, he had the opportunity to enjoy the international smorgasbord that is ISH.

"It was very interesting to meet all these people from different backgrounds," he said. "I learned a lot. It was challenging sharing lunch with people from Afghanistan, Egypt, Argentina and Scandinavia."

Vergara said he keeps in touch with at least 10 other ISH alums including a young woman from Laos who is currently working for a German aid organization in Thailand, another woman who is originally from Guadeloupe and who is studying in Morocco and a male friend who is pursuing a masters' of law degree in Geneva.

Vergara, who already has a law degree, is also planning to obtain a masters' in international law with a specialty in peace, justice and development. He said he has been accepted at Leiden University in the Netherlands for the 2013-14 academic year.

As a Spaniard - albeit one far too young to remember the Francisco Franco era - Vergara said he is intrigued by how countries emerging from conflict or "some other institutional deficit" rebuild societies on the basis of the rule of law.

Spain's emergence from dictatorship and transition to a constitutional monarchy was "a case study for East European countries coming from the Communist system," he said.

In helping countries evolve, however, Vergara said international advisers also need to respect countries' traditions and culture.

Foreign models cannot simply be translated and put into use, he said, citing Cambodia's post-Pol Pot penal code. Transplanted word for word from a half-century old code from France, Cambodia's former colonial ruler, the document includes many provisions no longer implemented in France such as a ban on press comment on court decisions, Vergara said.

Now in Jakarta, Vergara is focusing on labor rights - specifically those of women who work from home and who do not receive legal protection. "I am preparing the baseline report on the legal framework of Indonesia with regards to these homeworkers," he said. "Once I am done, I will start developing some good practice guidelines for employers of home-based employees."

Looking to the future, Vergara hopes for a full-time job with the United Nations, NGO or other organization that promotes rule of law. Helping Syria draft a new constitution would be a "dream," he said.

In the meantime, he cherishes his memories of ISH, of the Halloween party he attended on his last day and a gala dinner at the National Geographic Society where guests and selected ISH residents danced to vintage rock and roll. Occasionally, he said, he sends a note to members of the ISH staff "just saying thank you for the chance" to have such a unique and rewarding experience.