**Discuss an accomplishment, event, or realization that sparked a period of personal growth and a new understanding of yourself or others.**

Inti is blind and works at an NGO devoted to improve the welfare of the blind community. We met socially over a year ago and he illustrated to me the daily challenges faced by blind people by describing the difficulties and risks of visiting his grandmother. It wasn’t that she lived too far or that he didn’t know the streets, but the famously indisciplined Buenos Aires drivers made intersections unsafe, scaffolding and unmarked trenches left by public works crews popped up everywhere, delivery trucks blocked sidewalks, and so on. As usual, my mind switched into problem-solving mode. I felt confident I could create an app to offer Inti and the rest of the blind community optimal routes and to keep track of transitory obstacles. After all, I had access to very powerful tools and I had solved other complicated problems before. A few days later I persuaded a couple of friends to give it a try.

The problem, however, appeared to become more and more complicated as the days went by. Technology was not the issue, our lack of awareness of the experience of a blind person and our built-in biases were. For example, we took for granted that users would find it natural to interact with the app using the phone’s touchscreen interface. We were wrong, so we launched into designing audio features to provide them with feedback and in doing so I discovered that, in contrast to the Android platform, the iPhone’s accessibility support was wonderful. As I dug deeper into the iPhone accessibility functionality I was surprised by the elegance and the intelligence of the solutions implemented there. I was in awe of the effort and care that had been invested by a host of anonymous developers. For the first time in my experience a piece of tech revealed to me the good will and the compassion of many smart people whom I would probably never meet. I felt close to them, was inspired by them, and wanted to become one of them. I was familiar with the term “software with a social purpose”, but only then did I started to get the depth of the meaning.

The weeks went by and we worked around one obstacle after another, but what we had underestimated were the non-technical issues. For example, the Public Works department bureaucrats didn’t think our project was worth their time , so they did not give us access to work schedules. We were not prepared to let that stop us though, and our frustration spawned an experiment in crowdsourcing with students at our school. Many of our schoolmates agreed to watch and report obstacles as they walked to and from school. Their input helped us validate crowdsourcing as a viable and effective approach and as with “social purpose”, “crowdsourcing”, here, started meaning something completely different to me. I had talked about “crowdsourcing” so many times, but as a solution, an approach. In this case, that crowd had names and faces and I could see the impact of their volunteering. I had heard “it takes a village to raise a child” and I then realized that it takes a community to build software with a social purpose.

When we showed Inti and his colleagues what we had prototyped and how we were going about implementing the app, they were incredulous at first, then excited, then emotional. Watching Inti master the app interface made me feel fulfilled as I had never felt before. It made me realize I want to dedicate myself to socially minded work in the future.

**Rice is lauded for creating a collaborative atmosphere that enhances the quality of life for all members of our campus community. The Residential College System is heavily influenced by the unique life experiences and cultural traditions each student brings. What personal perspectives would you contribute to life at Rice?**

Five years ago I was diagnosed with scoliosis. When the doctor told me, I started crying. I knew it meant I was going to have to wear a plastic vest around my torso for many years.

The vest was a stigma. It was noticeable even under a shirt, so people pointed it out, and asked what it was. It made me feel different. I was limited in a number of ways by it. If it was sunny, I couldn’t go play outside because the heat would be unbearable. I couldn’t do anything that might cause me to fall because hitting the ground with the vest on would hurt me considerably. Running, playing sports, and riding a bike were completely out of the question. Moreover, every time I went through airport security I got pulled pulled aside and was asked to explain the vest.

In the beginning, I didn’t take it well at all. I would start hyperventilating at random times throughout the day. As I learned to live with it, this started happening less and less frequently.

Once I came to terms with the vest, time passed quickly, and a year ago, due to my spine having stopped growing, I was able to take it off permanently. It felt weird at first. After years of having worn the vest, not having something pressing on my chest felt liberating. I started enjoying all the activities I had lost touch with again, but after a while, I started experiencing strong back pain.

The doctor told me that it was caused by the lack of muscle supporting my back, so I decided to join a gym for the first time. It’s been a whole year, and I’ve never stopped attending. I developed a love for it because it allows me to put conscientious effort towards fighting a condition I’ll never be able to get rid of.

A few months ago I was offered the possibility of surgery: having a titanium rod attached with bolts to each side of my spine to straighten it. It would alleviate my back pain, but it also has its drawbacks. I wouldn’t be able to exercise for a year, and would lose flexibility for life. I’ve thought about it long and hard, and I believe it’s worth the sacrifice. It will allow me to go through my life without fear of damaging my spine. I'm proud to say I will undergo the surgery this February.

I acknowledge and I am very grateful for the positive effect of those who supported me and helped me cope. My experience with scoliosis made me realize how it feels to be different and misunderstood, and recognize the massive importance of being sensitive to the feelings and circumstances of others.