Going Global

Argentinian political scientist Adriana Piatti-Crocker brings the world to her classroom and her classroom to the world

By Mary Timmins

A Boston attorney who has moved to a trailer park in Arizona would seem an unlikely role model for anyone, much less a teenage girl growing up in Argentina. But it was indeed Tony Petrocelli, TV hero of a vintage NBC series, who inspired Adriana Piatti-Crocker to go to law school. “An American show about a lawyer who was devoted to helping poor people—that is what drove me,” says Piatti-Crocker, now an often lauded and well-loved UIS political science professor. “My first love was history and then the law,” she confides during an interview in her office on campus.

“I decided for law.”

While Petrocelli was airing in the mid-1970s, Piatti-Crocker was a Catholic schoolgirl leading what she describes as a “regular, middle-class life.” But for her—like everyone in Argentina—horror was never far from the doorstep. The country was in the grip of a military junta that terrorized the populace for almost a decade. “I was probably about 13 when the military dictatorship took over. As many as 15,000 people vanished,” she recalls. “None of my family members did. But I knew a lot of cases—including my neighbor, whose family was devastated by the brutality of this dictatorship.” Her neighbor’s brother and brother-in-law were “disappeared” (as they used to say) and her neighbor’s sister had to move to France to escape a probable similar fate.

Fortunately, Argentina’s arc of history bent toward justice and democracy returned in the early 1980s. In 1983, Piatti-Crocker, by then a young woman of 20, voted for the first time. “Many Argentines (including my own parents) had voted only a few times during the Cold War and since the 1951 presidential elections—because democratic regimes were interrupted by dictatorships,” she recalls.

Petite and vivacious, Piatti-Crocker has a contagious laugh. As the interview progresses, a colleague pops her head into the doorway of the office and compliments the professor on her footwear, beautiful platform sandals with blue suede straps that match her stylish flowered dress.

“I don’t have to stand much,” she laughs, though this is charmingly untrue. She is about to go from the interview in her office to the classroom across the hall. She makes coffee and prepares to meet her students. The title of the course she’s teaching tonight: “What Is Good?”

Identity politics

Her country’s suffering and transformation profoundly informs Piatti-Crocker’s lifelong passion for political science. Democracy in Argentina today has endured across three-and-a-half decades of rough economic times and populist tugs-of-war. And Piatti-Crocker has become an authority on how women are gaining political power there and worldwide. This empowerment is happening because of gender quota laws requiring that a certain percentage of candidates in national elections be women. In some countries, quotas apply to primaries, while in others they are mandated in general elections. “At the party level, the first country to introduce a quota was Norway in the mid-1970s,” she explains. “The first country to actually adopt a mandatory gender quota law

UIS Professor of Political Science Adriana Piatti-Crocker grew up in Argentina in the 1970s in the midst of a military junta. She turned to American TV shows for diversion, inspiration and solace, which sparked her interest in history and law.
Piatti-Crocker’s classroom is a window to the world. Students from Great Britain, Africa and the Middle East sit with those from Springfield and Central Illinois. They discuss Spanish conquistadores, Machu Picchu and Lima.

“The new game in town for Argentine women is gender parity. Because women are 50 percent of society, they also should be 50 percent of legislators.”

was Argentina back in 1991.” Today, gender quota laws support opportunities for women to hold office in democracies throughout Latin America, Europe, Africa and the Middle East.

Piatti-Crocker studies the impact of the laws, many of which are predicated on having critical minorities of 30 percent female legislators in governing bodies. In the Argentine Congress, a 40.3 percent representation of woman (averaging both houses) is now a reality. Working across party lines, women legislators have championed laws that address problems specific to their gender, including birth control (now free) and domestic violence.

Today, says Piatti-Crocker, “the new game in town for women is the issue of gender parity. The idea is that women should comprise not 30 percent, but 50 percent [of elected bodies]. Because women are 50 percent of society, they also should be 50 percent of legislators.”

Like her research, her teaching roams to faraway places. Last year, she offered a full class on the history and politics of Cuba, and then accompanied her students to the Caribbean nation over semester break. “That trip was the highlight of my college career,” says UIS senior Chloe Compton. “We stayed at the residence in the Centro Martin Luther King in Havana [a Christian-inspired organization promoting education and social justice] and we had speakers every day.” Topics included community health, economics, history, music, even paleontology. The group listened to Cuban music, ate Cuban cuisine and explored Cuban sites ranging from museums and temples to a crocodile farm and the Bay of Pigs.

“It was a deeply interesting experience and a turning point in my life,” recalls Compton. Under Piatti-Crocker’s mentorship, the young political science major is poised to pursue a career in government relations and diplomacy and will present a paper about Cuba at the Midwest Association for Latin American Studies in November.

Also onboard for the Cuba trip was UIS undergraduate Payton Raso, who describes the experience as “unreal.”

“Learning about President Kennedy’s economic embargo on Cuba in class was one thing,” Raso recalls. “Talking with people who had lived through it was another.” Earlier, in 2017, Raso was in Piatti-Crocker’s Model United Nations course. Under her guidance, class members formed a delegation representing Guinea, and then went to lobby for the African country’s best interests at the National Model U.N. Conference in New York City.

“Preparing to be part of the delegation was really cool,” Raso recalls. “It expanded my interest in geopolitics.” The group received the Outstanding Delegation award, one of just 15 so honored at the event. (Last spring, a UIS delegation led by associate professor Ali Nizamuddin again garnered the prestigious recognition—just the third time in 30 years UIS has received the honor. Three UIS students also won individual awards.)

Raso, now a senior, is planning to attend
law school, as his mentor did. “Dr. Piatti-Crocker helped me narrow down what I want to do,” he says. “She makes it so easy to approach her and to interact with her. She genuinely cares about her students and their progress, and she exemplifies why smaller universities are fantastic.

“Dr. Piatti-Crocker has made me very glad that I decided to attend UIS.”

**Finding what is good**

Framed by a blue-lit projection screen, Piatti-Crocker stands at the front of the classroom, balances easily upon her high heels and rewards her students with smiles as she queries them about current events. Seated at long tables that bisect the room, students from Illinois are interspersed with students from Great Britain, Africa and the Middle East. In the back, working the projection computer is Piatti-Crocker’s co-teacher Veronica Espina, Ma ’01, who grew up in Chile. Like Piatti-Crocker, she lived through a military dictatorship—in her case, that of Augusto Pinochet. World politics, it seems, are not so very distant from the farmlands of Central Illinois.

A course designed for honors students at UIS, “What is Good?” investigates this central question through studies in economics, culture, science, art and spirituality. Tonight’s topic is world systems theory, which categorizes nations according to the economic power they wield. Supported by Power Point slides, Piatti-Crocker’s talk is at once scholarly and engaging, embellished with details about Spanish conquistadores, Machu Picchu and Lima. She shows the students photos she took in South America and souvenirs she bought there: an open-mouthed pottery jar that holds water when inverted and a little Peruvian ocarina, an ancient musical instrument that makes a whistling sound.

Piatti-Crocker’s been back to Argentina many times since her main jump to the United States, now some years ago. After receiving her law degree from the University of La Plata, she practiced family and labor law, and then worked with the Argentine energy company YPF. That’s where she met Michael Crocker, an American and her future husband. When he returned home in 1990, she recalls, “I came to visit.

“And, well, I ended up staying,” she laughs. “My parents were not happy. I was the youngest daughter and quite rebellious. Still am.”

Arrival stateside confirmed the good news/bad news of a whole new beginning—circumstances that hearkened back to her long-ago lawyerly role model, Tony Petrocelli. “I had to start all over again,” Piatti-Crocker says. Rather than attend law school a second time (essentially the only way she could obtain the credentials to practice in America), she shaped her love of history, Latin America and international law into a new career. In 2005, she received a PhD in political science from Northern Illinois University and joined the faculty at UIS the following year.

Piatti-Crocker has gone on to win the admiration and gratitude of students, scholars and leaders across campus and in the University of Illinois System. Over the past two years, the Argentine professor has been showered with kudos. In 2016, she received the University’s Pearson Faculty Award, given annually to “a faculty member whose performance exemplifies UIS’ commitment to excellence in teaching and who stands among the very best teachers on campus.” Named Presidential Fellow of the U of I System in 2017, she became the first UIS faculty member to receive the honor. She has since been appointed institutional lead for the Culture & Society Committee of the Discovery Partners Institute, a $500 million U of I System initiative to promote research, teaching collaborations and technology development worldwide. Her assignment: form partnerships with institutions of higher education in Central and Latin America.

“Adriana is a great teacher and a great scholar who has educated me enormously on the politics of Latin America,” says Jason Piereson, a UIS colleague who has co-written two books with Piatti-Crocker on same-sex marriage. “When she came here in 2006, the department was mostly focused on U.S. politics. Now it’s pretty well balanced between U.S. politics and global politics.

“She has been a big part of that.”

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**Top Right:** Piatti-Crocker’s 2015–16 Pearson Faculty Award recognizes her for classroom performance that exemplifies UIS’s commitment to excellence in teaching.

**Right:** “Adrianna is a great teacher and a great scholar,” says colleague Jason Piereson, noting that she has played an important role in expanding their department’s focus beyond U.S. politics to a global outlook.