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Home Away From Home

It had been a summer full of planning, packing, and excitement. My partner school had prepared me as much as they could - as well as helped me along the way with transferring all my credits and the visa process. Now the big day had come. I was to fly from Norway Oslo Gardemoen airport to Philadelphia International airport. Exactly seven days before the first day of classes at West Chester University of Pennsylvania. My plan was to be on campus one week before so that I could explore America, land of the free. Little did know these seven days were not going to go as I had anticipated. Day one out of the seven days was spent in bed, jetlagged.

The next six days were spent discovering. As expected, I noticed that the way things in America worked was different from how things worked back home. I felt like a fish out of water. The language was different. The food was different and had a lot of cheese involved. I learned that cheese is almost a culture for Americans. I was not complaining though, because I love cheese. Back at home when I was thirsty I would just walk to the nearest tap and get water. Now I had to walk to the nearest store and buy a bottle of water. Additionally, the prices stated on different products were not the "real" prices. I had to always remember to add tax. This took time to adjust to and made me feel a bit cheated. Where I am from the taxes are already added to the products.

Fast forward to the first day of classes. Let us just say, thanks to Google for Google maps. I was now in college. I think I had watched all the American college movies there were to watch, and well, let us just say movies are not reality. Luckily I was not shy about asking people for directions when Google maps deceived me. However, it seemed like every time I attempted asking someone, I landed on a freshman, that was as lost as I was.

Two weeks in, the culture shock became overwhelming and homesickness increased. I missed my family and friends. I was tired of discovering new things, of not knowing. All I wanted was to be home, somewhere where I knew my way around everything, somewhere familiar. Thanks to technology, I was able to connect with my support system back at home to help me through the hardest times. They were all a call away regardless of the time difference. Thus, I managed to keep going.

I realized that the expectation I had built up about America was just a superstition. It took me time to adjust to the realization that I had to put all my previous expectation to rest and start from scratch – and so I did. I got a mentor and started attending different events in the multicultural student union. I became a member of a dance team and the rest of the semester flew by fast. Getting involved and integrating myself in student associations helped my mind cope with the unknown I was surrounded by.

The year I have spent studying here, a long way away from home has made a significant change in my life. It has given me new glasses to view the world through. It has helped me expand my cultural awareness as well as taught me many important life lessons. It has taught me that giving up should never be an option. Growth started when I was in a situation that was way out of my comfort zone. These are things I would not have learned if I gave up and decided to go back home when things got hard and uncomfortable.

Being in my third semester now, I would not wish to have had it any other way. I now reminisce about those "hard" moments and laugh because back then they caused unnecessary discomfort. This place has become my home away from home. As I am approaching the finish line, I can see that I have created connections and memories that will last a lifetime. One thing I can say was accurate about the college movies I watched before embarking this journey is that the connections and memories made in college are precious.