

First Steps of a Blue Hen

My journey at UD and in the US began a few months before the pandemic struck. While I was still getting exposed to a different social and professional environment, the coronavirus situation brought about unforeseen challenges and altered things significantly. It called for greater adaptability and resilience when I had just begun to embrace and feel at ease with an unfamiliar culture. In the process, however, I discovered unique learning opportunities, each imparting valuable life lessons. Here, I chronicle my experiences as an international student in the US prior to and during the pandemic.

Life before the pandemic was packed with excitement as I prepared to embark on a new phase of my career in the ‘land of opportunities’ albeit a very distant land. I was in high spirits in anticipation of new experiences and greater learning opportunities. However, I couldn’t help feeling a bit anxious about my survival skills so far away from home and in a different cultural environment. I had just attained the status of an uncle, with the birth of my niece, and the thought of leaving her and the rest of my family added to my uneasiness. Moreover, as someone who values cultural identity, I was unsure if my cultural background would be understood or respected in a foreign land. Despite these concerns, I undertook the 28-hour journey from India filled with hope, promise and plenty of family support.

During my first few days in the US, I befriended an extremely warm and welcoming family couple. Having two sons who pursued graduate studies away from home, they were all too familiar with the needs of a new student. They offered to become my host family and helped me settle down into my daily routine. In most of my public interactions, I tread cautiously because I was unsure about local conversational customs and I tried my best not to create awkward situations. As I began to expand my social circle, a frequent question I got was ‘What part of India are you from?’ Rather

than mention my town, city or state I'd simply say, 'From the south', but I was pleasantly surprised when some people knew the names of prominent southern Indian cities.

One of my early challenges was adapting to drinking water from the faucet. On asking my apartment owner about facilities for drinking water, he said "You can get it from the taps." I was shocked as tap water is unfit for drinking back home and I foolishly asked, "Are you sure this is safe?" It took a great deal of persuasion on his part to convince me about its safety and hygiene. I took a few nervy gulps from a glass of tap water; I survived but decided to purchase a water purifier to feel reassured. Grocery shopping in US supermarkets was another initially uncomfortable task. In my hometown, shopping is largely ad-hoc with quick, regular visits to roadside markets and small stores, but the sheer size of supermarkets here with several aisles of grocery items meant shopping took much longer. Frequent trips were inconvenient and I had to adopt bulk buying practices. Moreover, it took a while for me to realize that when the cashier or store assistant says, 'Have a good one', it refers to 'Have a nice day' and not 'Enjoy your purchase.' As time went by, I became more confident and capable in communicating with others.

I was gradually beginning to feel comfortable in my new environment; then the pandemic hit. The resulting lockdown meant 2 things: a new learning and working style, and limited social and outdoor activities. Initially, I thought all this wouldn't last very long and we'd be back to normal within a couple of months. But the pandemic had other ideas, forcing the year to be played out indoors and online. The biggest impact for me was rescheduling my work-related goals and putting on hold travel plans of visiting my family. I had to extend my timelines because on-campus work in laboratories and offices was suspended. This resulted in great uncertainty and quite a bit of frustration. I also missed spending time in the library and student centers or catching up with friends over coffee.

As the year wound down, it was time to welcome the Thanksgiving season but in a very different way amid the pandemic. Coming from a culture where traditional and religious festivals are celebrated with much enthusiasm, it was disappointing not to experience a local tradition fully and freely. After all, my purpose here was not purely academic but to learn about culture too. My host family organized a Thanksgiving lunch for a small gathering to which I was very kindly invited. They took the trouble of ensuring physical distancing and providing sanitizing facilities. It was an educational afternoon for me where I learned about the significance of the tradition and got to experience a little of American family life. I was thankful for the opportunity to be part of a family at a time I felt I needed it most.

I tried to take advantage of the virtual reality whenever I could. For instance, seminars and lectures were held online and recorded so I could watch them in my spare time. Moreover, I had opportunities to participate in several online discussion forums that boosted my self-confidence and skills in oral communication. 2020 was a difficult year to navigate but I am fortunate to have made it through with patience and perseverance. More importantly, I learned to be grateful and appreciate all that I have especially when others elsewhere were struggling in worse ways. I head into 2021 with the same belief that brought me here, of hope and promise of better times.