

An International Student Experience Unfolding into Professional Interests

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In 1981, almost forty years ago, I was dreaming of being an international exchange student in the United States. While my father was then very ill, my mother preferred that I did not travel and stayed at home with my family in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. But both my parents ended up allowing me to pursue this dream because they valued cultural exchanges. I took care of all the bureaucratic endeavours to travel. I would not lose an academic year with an experience of six months, I was determined to study and deeply motivated by the few friends and acquaintances who had been international students. Besides, this was not my first move. As a family, we have not only moved from Brasília to Rio de Janeiro, but also lived in Lebanon, Beirut. Yet, I was the first of a family of five children to travel to the United States.

PREPARATION AND EXPECTATIONS

I had some preparations meetings with the organization Youth for Understanding (YFU), which dealt with travel, visa status, bank account abroad and debated cultural lens differences, adaptation, and homesickness. We had to fill a list of choices, and I was not very selective about any issue asked by the organization such as living preferences, including living with animals and geographical location. Nevertheless, I expressed my fascination for the Great Lakes of North America. The amount of water within the limits of the earth seemed quite impressive to me. I was then selected to live in Illinois. I was first chosen by a family at Elmhurst, and we did exchange letters, but at the last minute due to unforeseen circumstances, the family was unable to have me as an exchange student. I ended up being designated to live with another family at Carpentersville.

FAMILY BOUNDARIES

My host family had another international student from Japan, and this host sister was indeed a great companion to me. We shared many of our dreams as seventeen-year-olds and learned a lot about the differences between our families and growing up in Brazil and Japan. We had as host parents a Japanese American father and an American White mother, who belonged to the working class, and did not have any books at home. This social class environment contrasted with the experiences we both had back home. And as time went by, it became clearer that the expectations we had as exchange students and those of the host parents were quite divergent. It was hard for them, but especially for the American mother to accept that we were not as free as herself to play. She worked occasionally part-time and needed a kind of attention that we could not give her. In fact, often she pretended that we had a physician appointment and took us out of school before the scheduled time of three pm. Unhappy with the course of life, after two and a half months I decided to ask the organization to move from this family. With the help of a school counselor, I patiently waited for the staff responsible from YFU to understand the reasons I wanted to move because at first, the negative reactions were that: the family was not complaining about me, Brazilians only wanted to party, and the Japanese sister had lived months before I arrived without any complaints. I was offered by the organization to move to another family in a different town, but this would entail changing schools and I would then lose my academic year upon return to Brazil. Despite all of the behaviors that were not fit for teenage exchange students' daily lives, such as being taken out of school for excuses that were lies, the drinking behavior of our host father, and endless demonstrations of competition of our host mother towards us girls, I identified many good aspects of both the host parents. He was hard working, and both were often affectionate and demonstrated joy to us. Nevertheless, I was determined to leave because I did not trust my host mother. She lied to my parents on telephone calls saying I was not home during my father's health procedures. She also pretended I moved to Germany with a boyfriend. So, because I needed to breathe a healthier family environment, I decided to find another host family. My Japanese sister moved to Barrington, and I went to live in Lombard, also in Illinois, where I was nicely welcomed by another family. Unpredictably, after we moved, we learned that our host mother had a false name, forged my signature to cash a Brazilian check sent by mail to me, and deceived me concerning the use of our joint bank account. The detective made her return the money of the check and an amount she also owed to my Japanese sister. Even though we were relieved to recuperate the money, it was undeniable that we all suffered and the whole situation was very odd.

SCHOOL AND DIFFERENT TOWNS

The High School we attended was in Barrington. As an international student, I faced prejudice that could have affected me. When I started to attend school, I was not allocated to academic disciplines with the excuse that I, being a foreigner, would not do well. I discussed this with the school counselor. Since I was strong-minded to have equivalent credits upon my return to Brazil, I soon was able to tailor my selection of courses with the academic disciplines I needed, such as Mathematics, Biology, and History; I dropped the cooking class and an additional free break. At that time, I also noticed that class differences seemed to direct students' coursework paths. The students who lived and studied in Barrington appeared to be more directed to better prospects of academic experiences after graduation than their counterparts living in Carpentersville and commuting to Barrington. In general, Barrington's students appeared much more affluent than Carpentersville's students. Because Carpentersville did not have a High School, it is undeniable that the bus system provided us all as students, and to another extent, other social actors involved an opportunity to experience different life perspectives and to some extent, notice differences related to social classes.

DEVELOPMENT OF PROFESSIONAL INTERESTS

During this anxious time as an exchange student while a teenager, I wrote in my diary the decision to study Psychology. The fact that I clearly identified what I did want to study next at the undergraduate level when I was a High School student abroad led me later in life to be willing to work with teenagers making their career choices. So, I have worked since 2005 in a Vocational Program for High School students at Oswaldo Cruz Foundation, Brazil. Furthermore, the comparisons then between experiences in the two cities and in Brazil and the United States made me think more critically about educational systems in both countries. In fact, the issues related to equity in formal education and cultural background shaping life's paths started to be also part of my professional interests. Therefore, in the 1990s, I attended a graduate program in International Education/Intercultural Education at the University of Southern California. I identified the root of these interests during my exchange experience when I was very concerned about the great social gap among students in my home country, which seemed related to the ability to take part of the school system as well. Up until recently, a few Brazilian teenagers would not attend school at all and among those who did the diverse types of schools lead to discrimination as well since their structural differences are designed, to a great extent, to serve students coming from either privileged or poor cultural and economic backgrounds.

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