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The cultural shock was imminent. As I entered the doors of the school, the “American Way” instantly fascinated me. Freshly painted walls, tiled floors, shiny blue lockers, and trophy stands, had only been a Hollywood fantasy to me, but now they were suddenly my reality. A mixture of excitement and fear coursed through my body as I found myself sitting in the middle of a history class, eager to make new friends, but unable to communicate. Thankfully, the initiative did not come from me; one of my new classmates came up and asked: “Where are you from?” My quick response was: “Brazil,” a word that, to my relief, required no translations to be comprehended. Interestingly enough, I was born in America, but I have no memories of an American childhood. Instead, all the fondest memories of my life commenced when my parents returned to their home country.

I grew up in Capelinha, a small, poor town with 40,000 inhabitants in southeast Brazil. The memories upon my arrival are minimal, but throughout the years, its welcoming atmosphere has remained the same: simple, but heartwarming citizens earnestly persuading one to come inside their homes to have a cup of coffee. Shirtless, barefoot skinny children laugh as they run after a soccer ball on the asphalt. Friends gather in late-night talks that eventually turn into a joyful melody accompanied by the swift accords of a guitar. The smell of traditional Brazilian food that came out of the windows and danced in the air.

Out of this apparent beauty, however, there is a harsh reality. The news continuously runs stories on teenagers who have been murdered by drug dealers. Gangs and thieves haunt the lives

of many honest families. Corrupt politicians steal millions from people struggling to survive, establishing the boundaries of inequality amongst the social classes.

The truth is that Brazil's reality is lamentable. Corruption, poverty, and violence taint the past two decades of its history. From the moment we are born, failure seems almost inevitable, and somehow my people still raise their heads and overcome the valley of shadows with high spirits. Happiness with no precedent is a trait that defines us. In their simplicity, there has always been a reason to smile and enlighten an incredibly dark world. Every day is won with perseverance and eagerness to achieve a better life.

I now live in the United States, but I have never forgotten Brazil. The vivid images of my people are to me as fuel is to a car. Every morning when I open my eyes, the memories of Capelinha remind me to be grateful for the grand opportunity I have been given to live in America. Yet, the journey here was never comfortable. From the moment of my arrival, each step I took seemed to lead me nowhere. When I could not express my thoughts in words, the simplest tasks became difficult challenges. I remember the nights when I spent hours trying to memorize the material for tests because I did not understand what the words meant. But I had one thing in mind, determination.

If I could give one advice to people who are going through this process now, it is to stick to what gives them hope in moments of difficulty, have an objective, and chase it. Most importantly, understand that it will never be easy, even when things start going their way. For me, the thought of providing my family with a better life is what gave me hope. When I am not motivated to take that one extra step, this hope reminds me that one day I will look back and realize that it was all worth it. I say this because I have been through it.

When I first arrived, I was unhappy and felt alone. Although I had friends, I could never relate to them. The paths they chose as typical high school teenagers, contrasted with the objectives I had in mind for my life. However, humans are a social species. The fact that I felt lonely gave me no confidence to be myself; instead, it made me vulnerable to what others thought of me.

At home, things were not easy as well. Once I arrived in this nation, I had promised myself I would give my family a better life, but the “new start” was a hard hit for all of us, especially my sister. My parents tried in every way they could to make her happy. Although I felt the same way, I did not want to add up to all the pressure of the transition to America, so I simply smiled. My personality had entirely changed. In Brazil, I was that person always to make a witty joke to break the ice and make everyone laugh. But, now, my state of mind had made me just another one in the house. It was difficult to see my family weary from this new start and feel incapable of putting a smile on their faces.

The Bible emphasizes in Proverbs that our parents’ words will guide us through the path of life. My father always gave me advice, but one of them, in particular, was the hand that lifted me. He said: “If you want to be successful in whatever you choose to do, you must be different.” I realized at that moment, my mindset was accurate, but my actions did not reflect that. I understood that my unwillingness to take risks put me in the shadow of the pre-established standards of society, to be more precise, high school. From that moment on, I embraced my own personality and became proud of who I was. Indeed it took time, but the challenges along the way made me more mature and confident in my actions and beliefs. Incredibly, this new version

of myself, allowed me to enjoy more truthful friendships and reminded me every morning of how blessed I am to be alive.

There is always a bright side to everything. It may be success or learning, but nothing is in our lives in vain. The difficulties I had to go through certainly matured me in a way that perhaps living in Brazil would not. All the issues forced to grow and become accountable. Such experience, as harsh as it seems, has given me the mental strength to face challenges always with a smile on my face. Ironically my humble, suffering Brazilian peers had taught me this lesson long before with smiles rather than words.