

“How do you like America ?” my new classmates asked me on my first day of school after moving.

I would usually respond in a favorable way and explain how thankful and happy I was to live in a country as great as the United States of America, even though I would sometimes be lost on my way to class or have difficulties reading the schedule.

“Where are you from by the way ?” continued my new peers eagerly.

“Let’s start from the beginning.” I replied.

My name is Alexandre Sullivan.

I was born in Paris, France where I grew up during my childhood.

Ever since I was a child, I have visited different parts of the globe with my father (Dubai, Ireland, Spain, Thailand, Tunisia etc.) and I was raised with the stories of my parents’ and grandparents’ frequent travels.

As the daughter of expatriates, my mother was born in Asia and raised in Spain, Japan and the Netherlands. Her mother was Norwegian and her father was French. She educated my sister and I in the Norwegian customs. On the other hand, my father is a proud Irish-American who raised us in the North American traditions. Like my mother, he has worked and lived in many different countries (U.K., Canada, France, U.A.E.etc.).

When I was 14 my father recently moved back to America. He offered me the opportunity to come live with him and discover America, my other country. I jumped at the opportunity without hesitation.

July 12th 2017 was the day when my life changed forever. I remember the heartbreaking goodbyes to my mother, promising to ourselves that we would see each other for Christmas.

Then I hopped on the plane and flew by myself for nine hours to a “foreign land”.

I don’t think that I will ever find the words to describe that feeling of both fear and excitement for the unknown, exacerbated by that solitude during the flight.

Ironically, I, a fifth generation of immigrants who came to the United States from Ireland, ended up “immigrating” and starting a new life similarly to my ancestors.

The difference is that they were immigrants coming by boat and trying to escape the potato famine whereas I was an American coming back home to a country that was unknown to me.

As I moved in during the summer, I spent the first few weeks setting up my room, buying all the school supplies that I would need and exploring the town.

Palisades Park is definitely an interesting place. The cultural and ethnical diversity makes it very unique. Mostly inhabited by people of Korean and Hispanic descents, it is a multicultural town with many stores and restaurants reflecting the cultural richness of the town.

When walking down the main street, one can see cybercafes, tea salons, Japanese, Chinese, Korean, Guatemalan, Mexican restaurants and Korean supermarkets.

I still remember the first time I went around town being fascinated by that cultural diversity built by immigrants like my ancestors or people who lived overseas like me bringing some of their cultures with them.

It made me realize that this mixture of nationalities and heritages is the strength of this country and what made the United States of America the richest and most advanced nation on Earth. Palisades Park is a multicultural community where people from various backgrounds live in harmony.

This same variety of culture was also very noticeable on my first day of school.

My first day of school was very stressful and intimidating. It was a huge cultural shock for me because I had never studied in an American institution before.

Everything around me was different and new: the language spoken around me, the hallways bordered with lockers, the huge gymnasium, the cafeteria with its long tables where more than fifty people could sit around and have a conversation while eating food that was different from the one served in a French high school.

Thus, I had an awful time understanding that I had to change classrooms between each class. Indeed, in France, we would spend the whole school day in the same classroom, with a fifteen minutes break every two hours and a two hours lunch break.

As every new student I eventually got lost as I could not read the schedule. Fortunately, as many other students like me were born overseas. Students were used to it and came to my help. They assisted me and helped me find my classes.

However, it was a very challenging experience.

After a few months, I faced huge challenges. Everything around me was different and new. It brought both a sense of admiration but also of disorientation.

All of my points of reference and all that I knew were gone. Everything that I learnt in France or from my Norwegian background was not only irrelevant but also conflicting with the customs. People talked, acted differently, counted in different units of measures and had different traditions. The whole environment and landmarks around me were unlike anything I had seen before.

I remember having headaches almost everyday when I came back from school since I wasn't accustomed to attending classes of science, math or history in English.

Added to that the distance between my mother and a part of my family soon began to be hard. This feeling was exacerbated by a growing "homesickness".

All those mixed feelings of confusion and hope are impossible to describe with words

No matter how hard it got, I never felt any regret regarding that decision nor have I thought about giving up as this experience was so beneficial to me.

In fact it gave me so many life lessons in such a short amount of time. The essential things that I have learnt were that in life, everything has a price. In that case, coming to America had a huge emotional price. To be separated from my sister and mother was harder than any words could describe but it taught me to be independent.

Indeed, I learned to be self-reliant and believe in myself.

This experience allowed me to expand my perspectives and realize that the world is a big place and that sometimes we worry about things that are not that important. Indeed, everything that I knew in Western Europe didn't exist in America and vice versa. Such perspective also allowed me to understand other people better and encouraged me to participate in our local community activities.

Even though this experience was challenging at first, it brought me so many opportunities and positive things.

First and foremost, I improved my English. I also finally discovered America, my country and my culture. As I have mentioned above it taught me many essential life lessons.

Furthermore, I met so many people coming from so many different backgrounds that helped me fit in.

As a way to give back to the community, I participated in many different community services. I tutored many younger students with their Algebra and Science homeworks. I also helped the Health fair at my local school to raise health awareness. I also helped with the environmental club with the local rivers cleaning programs.

To this day, I still help as many people as I can even if Covid can make things complicated.

For instance, because I took and excelled in both AP Biology and AP Chemistry, I tutor some college students to learn Biology and Chemistry Core Concepts over Zoom. I also help French students improve their pronunciation and oral comprehension.

If I could advise any other teenager who moved over a large distance like I did (5,000 miles), I would recommend them to open up to people, even if it seems intimidating at first. It allowed me to meet many people who helped me.

Also, I would advise them to be patient as it takes time to be accustomed to a new place that you will eventually call home.