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Relocation Scholarship

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There was no other option but to move. I experienced moving to completely different locations a few times during my life, but the most significant transition was the summer before and after my freshman year of high school. From South Korea, I flew alone to a small town in Virginia. A year later, I moved to where I currently live, New Jersey. These past two transfers were completely different from my previous ones because it was a change I experienced alone. I moved in with two different families in the span of a year, and each location was a cultural contrast to my home in Korea. While riddled with a lot of challenges and missteps along the way, I've discovered myself in ways that will forever inform how I navigate the world around me.

I was born in the United States to two undocumented parents but our household was considerably fortunate: having to face no citizenship issues for twelve consecutive years. It wasn't until our family decided to move back to Korea that we experienced the unfortunate reality of living undocumented. I can still remember the shock as my father sat me and my siblings down to say, "We will not be able to return for the next ten years, but Esther alone will come back someday." I didn't know what to think nor could picture myself alone in a different country. Imagining a future without my family was simply impossible. However, the excitement of moving to Korea quickly consumed and unified my thoughts.

The real Korea was completely different from what I had known or could expect. Over there it was considered rude to wave hello and respecting elders was law. Slurping was an

expression of appreciation and public transportation was used with no disgust. But those small culture shocks were comparably minor to the one I experienced at school. I was stunned to discover that most of my peers attended cram schools to learn the curriculum months in advance. It seemed impossible to reach similar academic levels at first, but every year I found myself pursuing good grades with the same rigor and soon adapting to that lifestyle. Before I knew it, I was blending in and finding my place in this world. But four years after arriving in Korea, my father's words came true. It was time to leave home again. This time, alone.

I was fourteen years old when I innocently believed that simply returning back to the United States meant that everything would fall into place and success would follow. But nothing was as easy as I thought; there was no one to rely on and I started to fear the world around me. It took a few weeks to adjust back into the American lifestyle, but almost an entire year to truly accept the first host family while I attended a new school, kept my grades up, and made new friends. As much as I had wished, these processes were not quite sympathetic to me. It was actually really distressing to maintain my true character. Because I was in this transition without my biological family to support me along the way, I didn't exactly know how to be myself and fit in with my American peers. I thought I had to change my personality to be accepted by others and so I did. For every person I encountered during my freshman year, I lied to myself to please the other. I suppressed my feelings and forced a smile as I was riddled with fear that people wouldn't like me the way I naturally am. However, it was too late to change what I had already started. When it was time to move again, I considered it as another chance to start fresh.

The feelings of fear and loneliness followed me to my next destination, but strangely it felt smaller than it was before. Maybe it was because it was my second year alone or I was just

determined to take advantage of a new beginning, but I quickly adapted to my new environment. Soon, I embraced and was embraced by my new community, a predominantly Latino community with cultural norms unlike any I knew but whose generosity and warmth truly supported me.

There is a saying that “Spanish is the language of love.” The Latino community that I became part of proved that claim to be true. It was enriched with expressive love and culture. The music, the lifestyle, and the community itself were very different from where I was raised. I was brought up from a conservative background, therefore, I naturally was inexpressive. Concealing my feelings and opinions was my unconscious behavior. However, over the years of living in this community, how I perceived the world changed. I became more open-minded and affectionate towards those around me. I realized the only way to show my love and appreciation to others was by communicating. I had lacked these types of communication skills, but being part of one of a predominantly Hispanic community has taught me the value of being able to express who I am with no shame.

Without the burden or stress constantly suppressing me, I focused on building my ability as a student. I challenged myself to take higher-level classes in school and expose myself to new experiences and opportunities. From general to honors and honors to AP classes, each year I pushed myself to reach higher and higher. I stumbled upon several failures in the beginning, but those failures motivated me to do better and become the best I can. I also encountered new people of all ages and backgrounds. At first, leaving my comfort zone to build new relationships seemed pointless, but I realized meeting new people, regardless of age, was stabilizing me. Every conversation, every interaction, and every minute together with the people I met throughout high

school was priceless. They all taught me something different, but in common, they all showed genuine love, which made me realize I am loved for being me and only me.

It's difficult to leave everything you had behind, but it's important to take advantage of every situation and convert them into opportunities. If there is one thing I learned from moving, it's to stay strong and be yourself. Don't change what you like, how you act or what you want to become for others. You are capable of being loved simply for who you are and once you realize that, there is nothing to fear. The moment you're true to yourself is the moment you are home.