

Dear Esteemed DKG Community

I am Mukadas Tashieva, a Fulbright scholar who came to the United States with my family with the goal of opening doors of opportunity for children with disabilities in Kyrgyzstan. My dream is rooted in the belief that America will help me discover new methods to teach and create better educational opportunities for children with special needs. In this letter, I would like to express my heartfelt appreciation for your continuous support in my educational journey at Kent State University through the Fulbright Foreign Students Program. Additionally, as a storytelling letter, I wish to share my first-year experiences—highlighting the challenges faced and successes achieved on my path to realizing the American dream for students with disabilities. I will also share significant moments from my study and family life over the past year.

Excitement about America Made Us Brave

Reflecting back on our initial travel to the U.S., I agree with Mrs. Marilyn Slusser's words, "Mukadas, you are brave," when she called to discuss the amazing opportunity and great support from DKG. I was too excited at the time to fully appreciate her words, but now I understand. Our journey was marked by bravery—four days and 22 hours of flight from our mountainous country with four children and my husband. Entering a new country without knowing anyone or having a specific place to stay was a bold step, driven by the belief that our lives would change for the better.

We spent five days in a hotel searching for an apartment. Each day was filled with hope and new experiences. We navigated calling Uber taxis, asking for directions, and exploring places on foot with the whole family and going through the online application processes for every activity that we wanted to start such as: renting, school reenrollment, family insurance plan and visiting. Initially, finding an apartment was challenging due to the number of children and the lack of a credit score. Eventually, thanks to the Fulbright coordinator and student tips, we secured a student apartment for my family and received DKG support for our first household and children needs.

Learning about the U.S. Education System

Our four children were placed in different schools: Erika (4 years old) in pre-school, Temir (9 years old) in elementary school, Nurislam in middle school, and Bai (16 years old) in high school. This was a significant change from Kyrgyzstan, where they would have attended one school being different grades. We are grateful for the supportive school teachers and administration who eased our children's transition. My husband and I, both teachers, were eager to learn about each school's system, teaching approach, and opportunities for students.

Every evening, we shared our children's school experiences and practiced one-minute speeches on the topic "My day." This activity helped to improve their speaking skills and allowed us to monitor their school adjustment. Our children excelled in their studies and joined school soccer teams. For example, all three boys are in the school and Kent city soccer teams, which is great chance to be involved into healthy life style and have more friends. Moreover, we received thankful notes, certificates of achievements from subject teachers and attended parent-teacher meetings to discuss their progress. In addition, the experience of taking school buses, seen only in American movies, became a delightful reality for my daughter, who eagerly woke up early each morning to ride the bus. Celebrating American holidays also enriched our cultural integration, where we mostly enjoyed celebrating Thanksgiving Day and Christmas seeing people's unusual love and full of happy emotions everywhere on the street, shopping areas, at the

university and schools. As if we were in the American dream, especially, when we receive a congratulation Christmas card from Gamma Pi Chapter with some financial support for our children holiday plans. We were so excited for the given attention, for the warm wishes and beliefs for our family success.

No Pain, No Gain

This section of my story focuses on my study journey at Kent State University, where nearly 80% of the learning process was completely new to me. The first semester (fall) was primarily dedicated to adjusting to the university's study process, student life, and the opportunities for independent learning. Additionally, mastering special education terms and regulations consumed almost two months of the semester. I had to create special cards, seek out additional resources, and immerse myself in various topics and course assignments to gain a deeper understanding. Balancing a comprehensive study plan for the semester, family responsibilities, and meeting assignment deadlines were some of the painful and challenging moments that significantly enhanced my time management and critical thinking skills.

A standout moment of the fall semester was the Case Study assignments, where I collaborated with American school students to analyze and support their reading skills. The second semester fully immersed me in research, with two classes focusing on Special Education research and one on Curriculum Development in Special Education. This experience truly embodied the saying "no pain, no gain." I felt like an athlete running a marathon, requiring persistence and hard work to achieve my goals. My aim was to earn "A" grades to meet my scholarship requirements, which was a formidable challenge.

Despite the difficulties, I was deeply engaged and inspired by my studies in special education. Through literature reviews and research projects, I discovered vast opportunities for children with disabilities to integrate into mainstream schools. This experience solidified my commitment and led me to decide to write a Thesis Statement for my graduate year. I believe this decision will empower me to develop inclusive education opportunities alongside special education in my country in the future. So far, I am pursuing my internship opportunities at the FHI360 in Washington D.C. where I succeeded to become a winner of the Muskie Fellowship for Fulbright students in the U.S. It gives me a great chance to be involved into the U.S. organization working experience and learn about the diversity at work, enhance my project writing skills for minority family children including children with special needs around the world. This is another great achievement during my study journey in the U.S.

In conclusion, I would like to say that A. Margaret Boyd sponsorship has significantly alleviated the financial burden of my education, allowing me to focus more intently on my studies and research. This support has not only provided me with the resources to excel academically but has also given me the confidence to pursue my goals with greater determination. Thanks to your generosity, I have been able to finish my first year successfully, become a collegiate member of the Gamma Pi Chapter and presented at the International TESOL Convention panel discussion bringing our work with English teachers in Kyrgyzstan. These experiences have been invaluable to my personal and professional growth, and I am profoundly grateful for the opportunities you have made possible.

With gratitude,
Mukadas Tashieva
Fulbright Program scholar from Kyrgyzstan