



Literacy Volunteers
of Somerset County

1981-2021

Connections: A Student Newsletter

Volume 7 – November 2021

Hello friends,

We are proud to present the last edition for 2021 of our newsletter Connections. This edition contains 20 articles, a record number of contributions from our fellow students. The theme for this edition is **“what surprised or confused you when you first came to the United States?”**

Responding to this intriguing and fascinating question, our students produced beautiful and touching articles, long and short, about their first impressions, memories or experiences about first moving to the United States. Each story is unique and personal and no matter if they got here 20 years ago or arrived just this year, all of them capture the essence of our condition as human beings; we want to understand and to be understood, to love and be loved, to accept and to be accepted. Moreover, all the stories teach us what it is like to live in a new country and learn a new language.

We hope you enjoy your reading.

We wish all of you an end of 2021 with health and peace. We'll see you in the next year.

The Student Outreach Committee.

Things that surprised or confused me, when I first came to the United States

Written by H. Lee.

When I came to the US, I was pregnant with my first daughter.

It was still 2 and half months before the due date. At that time my insurance coverage was terrible. But my OBGYN doctor wanted me to have an ultrasound very often, because I was quite old to deliver for the first time and my baby needed more imaging. I didn't know about in-network and out of network insurance. The employee at the radiology center told me I should contact my insurance company directly to check the coverage.

I am not good at speaking to people on the phone. Finally, I used an interpreter and found out there was no coverage from my insurance. So, I paid almost \$500 for every ultrasound and I decided not to have one for the last month because it was too expensive and I thought I would deliver normally even if my baby had some problem. After all that, when my first daughter was born, I only asked a doctor, "Is she normal? Does she have 10 fingers and toes?"

Now She is 8 years old. She is a healthy and lovely girl and also has a younger sister. It was a very confusing experience about the medical insurance system in the U.S.

Be dare to live in new country

Written by Nadezda Ivanov



Hello!

My name is Nadezda. My family and I moved to the USA from Russia when I was almost 40 years old.

I've never thought about immigration before. I was never ready to live in another country. I had no too much information about the US. What do we usually know about another country just by listening to the news and watching a travel or history channels? We don't know anything about everyday life. But when you live in a new country, everyday life is most important to you. Greeting, leaving, polite behavior, parenting, holidays, education, shopping, etc. are all different from your home country.

The first time I was surprised when I was walking in the neighborhood, and an unknown person asked me: how are you? I have never met this person, I had no idea why he asked me, I asked myself, what should I do in this situation? My second question: why is he smiling? In Russia, people don't smile at a stranger. Now I think it's great that people smile. And I smile at a stranger when I come to Russia.

Another thing that surprised me was the relationship with children. Americans praise their children. In Russia, we push our children and say they can do better. This may sometimes devalue their efforts and achievements. I'm not still sure that parents should complement their kids like Americans, but I stopped criticize my son too much. I'm trying to find a good balance between praising and pushing. In Russia, older people or strangers may

talk to children to discipline them or judge them. I'm really glad I don't see it here in the US.

One more thing that scared me was small talk. Anyone can ask or say something to you. In a store, in a park, a person you don't know may say to you, "It's a beautiful day, isn't it?" Or cashier may tell you, "I like your necklace/ring/bracelet/dress/shoes etc.". This situation is not common in my home country. And I felt uncomfortable, especially because of my bad English. I was not sure if I clearly understood what I was hearing. I really didn't know what to say back. I was embarrassed of my pronunciation and vocabulary. Smiling and telling "thank you" helped me look polite and friendly.

And the American cuisine made a huge impression. When I first came to the restaurant, I ordered an appetizer and main course, as I did in Russia before. But when I saw the first dish, I realized that I could not eat anything else. The serving size is gigantic! The good news was that I can take the leftovers home.

The last thing I would like to share is the amount of sugar in food. It always seemed to me that Russians have a sweet tooth. I be honest I really like sweets. But when I tried American yogurts, cookies, cakes, ice-cream I understood how I was wrong! In the US I have to spend a lot of time to find my "guilty pleasure", which contains a not too much for me amount of sugar.

After all, I want to say to newcomers: don't be shy, don't be scared. You will always find people who will help you in any situation. USA is a country of immigrants. All Americans have overcome the difficulties of new life. And you will pass too!

Things that surprised or confused me, when I first came to the United States

Written by Lineth Salas

I came to New Jersey 2 years ago from Costa Rica. When I first got here I realized that you absolutely needed to have a car in order to go to work, food shop, take your son to the doctor, or just get places. At first, we only had one car but when we both got a job we needed to purchase a second car in order to get around. It was surprising for me because in Costa Rica public transportation was very available - even between small towns. In this part of New Jersey, the roads are much better and it is easier to travel on them.

Another thing I found different was the importance of having a good credit score right away when we were trying to get an apartment. We were immediately asked to prove our income and salaries. We had to have references that proved we were responsible with our monthly payments. In Costa Rica we didn't need any of that information in order to get an apartment.

Also, in Costa Rica you could get drugs such as an antibiotic without a doctor's prescription. In Costa Rica you could get the drug by just going to the pharmacy without anything from a doctor.

I'm really happy to be here in the United States although many things are different from where I came from.

Things that surprised and confused me when I first arrived in the US.

Written by Yorleny Fuentes

First, I'd like to say that learning about cultural connection or about the culture of a country is very important. People tend to make assumptions and I think it's a very dangerous thing. There are so many things that surprised or confused me when I first arrived in the United States. For instance, malls. Malls were terribly huge. Everything looked so sophisticated and top of the line. Roads were so smooth and even; sometimes I didn't even feel the pavement. It was very easy to drift off while riding in a car. I was also confused and so curious about why Americans salt their food before they even taste it. When I remember this one, I always crack up. I was literally shocked when someone asked me for the first time "what do you do for a living?". To me, it was very impolite and rude, I felt very offended. Asking it in that way is very rude in my culture. The next one was a piece of culture shock. Costa Rica is a tropical country, very hot and very humid. It's very acceptable to wear very short shorts and tank tops. I used to dress in the same way here. I learned that Americans tend to cover up more than in Costa Rica. I realized this when one of my son's friends wasn't allowed to visit my house anymore because his mother felt I was dressing provocatively. Since then, I dress like a tomboy. Don't judge the book by its cover. It's easier to understand people when you know about their cultures.

I'm still in the honey moon phase with this country. I love it very much. It makes me sick to my stomach when I hear someone speaking ill of what is my home now.

Things that surprised or confused me, when I first came to the United States

Written by Nazli Sahin

Hello everyone,

My name is Nazli. I was born in Kutahya, Turkey. After graduating from college, I got married and I came to America for short time. I returned in Turkey and stayed there until last October. I've been living in Skillman, New jersey for the last year.

One of the interesting things to me in America is that the people working at the workplace are very relaxed. They don't rush their work, what is more interesting is that those waiting in line wait patiently.

Another interesting thing is when I see the foreign people outside, they smile and say "hi" to me. It is interesting and good attitude.

Thank you.

Wearing Shoes Inside the House?

Written by Sunny Lee

When I lived in Korea, the most shocking scenes while watching American movies and dramas were when people were lying or sitting on the bed wearing shoes because we don't wear shoes in our homes. My parents always told me to take off my shoes on the porch and wash my hands and feet in the bathroom when I got home. Finally, after taking a shower, I was able to lie in bed. Even now, I teach my daughter the same thing my parents taught me. Even now that we live in the United States, we ask guests to take off their shoes when we invite them into my house. We provide some disposable shoe covers for a worker who cannot take off his safety shoes. Now that I have lived in the United States, I understand that the heating system is different from Korea. Since Americans don't have heated floors, they leave their shoes on. I still keep that part of my Korean culture.

Culture shocks and some tips for newcomers

Written by John Ye

Culture is an umbrella term, which includes various features like history, language, food, arts, geography, beliefs and family value, etc. Culture itself has profound and strong relations with its history. Generally, the more extended history you live in a country, the richer you feel in culture. China belongs to one of these nations. But on the other hand, the United States has been warmly embracing people with different cultural backgrounds from all over the world. That is why it has become the best-known county for its cultural diversity, though the U.S. itself has a short history. Culture does have a significant influence on people's traditions, customs and behavior, So most of us will experience, more or less, the procedure of euphoria, discomfort, adjustment, and acceptance. That is so-called culture shock. Let me share two of my culture shock with you.

1. Sneezing: when you sneeze in China, typically people have no reaction about it, but someone you are familiar with will says "drink more water," "take care," or say "you are sick," "someone did trash-talk about you.," " someone misses you." etc. But in the USA, I was confused when people (no matter you are familiar or not) say" God bless you" or "bless you" to someone sneezing. It took me a while to understand that America is a Christian-dominated nation and think God can make you healthy. Of course, this slang becomes a general compliment term like Be well when you sneeze or Thank you for what others have done for you.

2. No sound while eating: Even now, I still feel embarrassed when dining with others who have no-sound-when-eating culture. Some Americans think eating with sound is rude, whereas Chinese will be either carefree or think that you enjoy yourself while having hot or spicy noodles and gulping the soup down with all your body in sweat.

In summary, culture can't be measured or judged. Each culture has its uniqueness or pros and cons. None of the cultures is head and shoulders above others. Hence, we need to respect, understand, embrace different cultures. Nowadays, we all live in a global village and are knitted together tightly, so culture shock between countries is getting less and less.

My takes on culture shock for you newcomers to the United States:

1. Go ahead before leaving your country to research and understand the culture of the U.S., especially the culture of the city you desire to live in. Then compare and narrow down the main cultural differences between your country and the U.S.
2. Have self-confidence in your ability to get used to the culture shock gradually and accept it finally. Share a quote from an unknown person: I NEVER LOSE. EITHER I WIN OR LEARN.
3. Language is extremely important for newcomers. Good language skills can give you a deep insight into American culture quickly and accurately. Therefore, you need to nail down your goals, immerse yourself in the English language environment, and become integrated into English language society. I strongly recommend you join the ESL program hosted by Literacy Volunteers Somerset County (LVSC) to achieve this goal. All the teachers have been bending over backward to help each student in all aspects. Last but not least, you will make friends with many other students who are always ready to help you.

The first day of Marco's School

Written by Martha C. Vasquez M.

Daddy and Mommy are very excited because Marco will start to School. We prepared all things for this day. It woke up raining and dark but this is not was important. It was the first day of Marco's School.

Marco woke up excited and happy. Marco and Mommy took at the breakfast. We sang different songs. This day was perfect! Mommy check all stuff in the Marco's backpack and We went to the street. Marco needs to take School bus. The street was full of children and parents together with the same emotions for the first day of School. The parents talked on and another, the children were happy. This day seemed a party day at 7:30 am. The first School bus was Marco's School bus. The school bus stopped to pick him up at that moment Marco started crying and screaming and He screamed "I want to go home". My heart broke in thousand pieces. We finally went home. All parents and children were silent. Silence took over the street. During this day Mommy explain to Marco as all children went to School and this place was fun. We played with School bus toy. We made picture about School, teachers and children. When Daddy came back home at night, He again explained to Marco the important go to the School. We went to bed. We thought tomorrow will be the best School second day. When Marco awakes up, Mommy explain to Marco today Marco are going to get on a school bus. Marco said "OK Mommy" He seemed calm but Mommy was nervous but She was going to try to handle it. When Marco arrived to street. The street was full again parents and children. Marco and Mommy walked with security suddenly appeared the School bus and What surprise! Marco took the School bus without problems it was very easy. As soon as the School bus left, the parents and children applauded and parents screaming "Good Job Mommy" Oh my God! Mommy felt happy, united and loved even that feeling still accompanies

me. This generous act of kindness in the US makes us reflect on how I can change the lives of others by bringing optimism, empathy and compassion.



A trip to the past

Written by Andrea Serrano

Wow, really you made me go back 20 years, I came to the United States in 2002. I think the first thing that impressed me was the immenseness of the highways. It was the beginning of spring and those trees looked spectacular, any photograph looked beautiful, with the blossoming of the trees.

I arrived at my aunt's house, and everything looked so nice, so clean. I remember that part of the house was covered with carpet and we had to take off our shoes so as not to get it dirty. Having hot water in the sink was something totally new for me, using the vacuum cleaner and having a washing machine and dryer. In my country you wash by hand and you are very lucky if you have a washing machine, then you put your clothes outside on a rope to dry.

Definitely, the language was a great barrier. I remember that at that time not everyone had a cell phone, there were still public telephones. It was so difficult for me to use them. I did not understand a single word or how much money to put in - it was very frustrating! I had to wait until someone could lend me a cell phone.

After I found the dollar stores, I could not believe that you could buy so many things with one dollar, as time went by I realized that I do not need so many of those things.

Another challenge for me was the transportation system. I did not understand, or did not know how to read, the bus schedule. Little by little asking questions and getting lost, I was able to better locate myself and get where I needed to go. Well, technology helped us a lot - at that time there was not as much technology as now.

About the value of money, I did not know how much the equivalence was and I simply told the cashier, "Please take what you need. And I would show him all the money I had.

I think I could tell you so many of the challenges that happened, but I think the most beautiful, and the one that touched my heart the most was the special and beautiful care that I got when I was pregnant with my children. The prenatal and postnatal care was so kind and compassionate, for me and my babies, even though they didn't know me and it didn't matter where I came from.

I believe that love of neighbor, compassion, equality, respect, and tolerance help us to survive any challenges that change brings and to overcome them.



Things that surprised or confused me, when I first came to the United States

Written by Shimaa Neama.



As we all know the differences between the cultures could lead to problems, difficulties, and misunderstandings. That's exactly what happened to me. I came to the USA in 2013. At first all things around me sounded weird. The language, habits of people, and everything, but with my husband's help step by step I got used to all these things.

Sure, I faced a lot of confusion and hard situations specifically at the beginning of my journey. Definitely, there are a lot of stories and situations surprised or even shocked me. The first thing that surprised me most is that any couples can kiss and touch each other in public even in front of kids. In my country that is not acceptable, prohibited, and illegal. Most of the time I was trying to avoid my kids to see that. I tried that in many ways. I think the kids deserve to be in a healthy environment until they get big enough to understand the body parts and how to protect themselves. Otherwise maybe they would imitate what they watch.

The second thing is I never thought that I will stand out that much. People were staring at me because of my scarf on my head. Their looks made me feel like something is wrong with my appearance, but after a while I got used to these looks. Part of my heart understands and excuses them because they have a reason to do that. That's the same

thing that happened to me at first is the differences between the cultures or the culture shock. As much as I got criticizing looks, I got a million of compliments from people I really didn't know.

Even if I think that Americans have different cultures and backgrounds than us, I still admire and respect them in many ways. They are so nice, and I like the way they speak to the people and how they motivate them to reach their goals. They love to help their community.

The last thing that was confusing to me is the greeting. Americans are so kind and they greet people even if they don't know them. They greet people on roads, stores, and everywhere. That was confusing to me. When anyone that I didn't know was greeting me in my neighborhood, I always thought he must know my husband. That was what I really thought about it. Until one day I asked my husband, and I was really shocked when I knew the truth. All those kind people who were greeting my kids and me were strangers.

As a part of the greeting some people say what's up! or how are you doing? has brought a lot of confusion to me. At first When anyone was asking me using those words, I always thought that I have to say something about what is happening in my life lately. Until I got the idea of the real meaning of those words. Those words have the same meaning as the word hi.

Finally, understanding these tricks between those cultures is the best thing that has happened to me. I have learned a lot of things and now I excuse people even more, understand their differences, and respect these differences than before.

Things that surprised and confused me when first I came to the Unites States.

Written By Artur Gawkowski

When I came to United States there were a lot of surprises and confusion. One of the things that confused me was that everything is rushed. The idea of rushing is shown the most in New York. One of the things that surprised me was the opportunity for everyone to work, especially in New Jersey. As I came to United States I had gotten a lot of job offers. I have lived here already for 5 years and every day there is always something new to discover and be shocked about. In my opinion United States is extraordinary and fascinating.



Things that surprised and confused me when I first came to the United States

Written by Maria Lourdes Mejia

Even though I studied English in Mexico, when I came here, I didn't understand anything, that caused me a lot of frustration. I had spent a lot of money and time learning English in Mexico.

So the first thing I did was look for a school where they would guide me there, and one of my friends told me about this organization, LVSC. I had a great teacher and excellent person, her name is Joanna Halla, who after 15 years is still helping me.

Moving here to live with family or friends is not easy, you have to work hard to be able to become independent. My main problem was being able to communicate with the people. My daughter was scared, she was 8 years old, she didn't know any English and was worried she couldn't explain to the teacher that she wanted to go to the bathroom. But since the first day of school she had a partner that spoke Spanish and English, so she was so happy.

It took me three years to be able to have my own apartment and to do so I worked every day. But it is worth it.



Maria and her daughter this year

How are you?

Written by Jiyoung Kim

This question is the most difficult one for me, and it still makes me uncomfortable. I learned it like below when I was a middle school student.

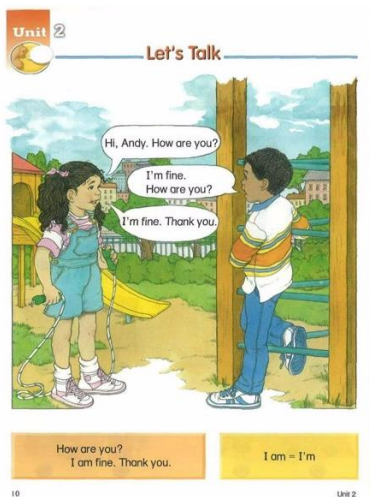
A: How are you?

B: I'm fine. Thank you. And you?

A: Fine. Thank you.

It was when I learned English for the first time, and I'd been stuck in this sentence structure for a long time. For this reason, I tried to answer that question like that I learned when I got it. However, some people just passed by me after asking me how I was without trying to hear my answer. Also, some people asked me again without an answer how I was when I asked them how you were. Fortunately, some people asked me and then answered to me as I'd learned.

I confused for those situations at that time. After that, I realized that 'How are you' was not always a question, and it also means simply 'Hi'. I do not have to answer it. I got to know that, but honestly, it is not comfortable yet.



Example 3



Things that surprised or confuse me when I first came to the United States

Written by Faye Huang

When my husband and I moved into a new house in New Jersey, two ladies visited our house. They knocked on the door and said that they were our neighbors and they were a gay couple. They were very kind. We felt surprised. In China If you are gay, you generally don't tell others. It may be a secret.



Struggling and learning

Written By Shiori Sasaki

I moved to the United States from Japan this July. I've been to some big cities in the US for short trips, however moving to another county is totally different from visiting.

I've been struggling with the measurement system since I moved to the US. I've stayed in New Zealand and Australia for a while, so I thought living in the US is similar to what I experienced in those countries. Later, I found that my prediction was too optimistic. When I ordered bubble tea, I was asked which size I wanted. I asked about the quantity of the small size. They answered it with an ounce. I got kind of in a panic by the unexpected answer. I finally figured out the quantity by seeing the sample cups on the counter. It was my first experience how much the measurement system is significantly involved in my regular life. Also, every time I go to the supermarket and try buying fresh produce, I need time to calculate the price per pound if it is reasonable.

There is not only the measurement system but also traffic rules that make me still uncomfortable. In my country, pedestrian lights always turn to red or green linked with car traffic lights, however there is a light that needs to be pressed with a button to turn to green. So, I sometimes wait for a long time when I miss out on pushing the button. I learned a good part too. Cars are allowed to turn right at the even red light if there is no car coming. That rule does not exist in my country, so I think it is very practical and strategic to mitigate traffic.

I am still struggling with small things but I enjoy learning new systems and culture. Please tell me if you have tips to settle down your new life!

Things that surprised or confused me when first I came to the United States

Written By Simone Tanaka

When I moved to New Jersey from Brazil, I was unaware of the use of the word "change" to mean small denominations of money. Another word I didn't know was "charge" meaning to pay using a credit card.

A cashier asked me about both words and I didn't know the meaning of them. Another thing that I was surprised about was how easy it is to return any purchase without explaining why you need to return it and the money goes back to the account.

Things that surprised or confuse me when I first came to the United States

Written by Helen Maria Alfaro

When I got to the USA, six years ago from Costa Rica, I was always confused about the word 'traffic' because in my home country, 'traffic' means police.

When people said that 'traffic was heavy,' I thought the police were giving tickets everywhere!

Something that confused me when I was newer to the US

Written by Tracy Ho

I like to walk in nature preserve parks or mountains. I had a funny story when I first time visited the nature preserve in Plainsboro township. It was open at 7 o'clock, I arrived exactly when they opened. I saw only one person there. I walked into the area awhile. I saw the sign hanging on the tree with a picture of a bison. I tried to read it, it said "Buddy bison national park trust (Yellowstone)". I understood all words except bison, I checked my dictionary and it was wild buffalo. But I wasn't sure what this sign was for? If it wants to tell people to be careful because the area may have bison. It alerts me don't walk further, if I get attacked by bison no one nearby will see me, because it was so quiet. Then I walked back to the center. There were a few notes hanging on the board, one was about the game that let children play to hunt for a picture of a buddy bison. After I read that note suddenly, I felt I'm so dumb and also is funny.

I didn't know what was different between bison and buffalo. I Googled it, it said you can tell them differently with three 'Hs' words; Home; Hump; Horn, bison adapted to live in cold conditions and buffalo not. Hump; bison have large hump and buffalo don't. Horn; bison have small sharp horns and buffalo have longer horns. And bison have beards and buffalo don't.

I 'm happy I learned it, and now I know the word bison. I can tell the difference between bison and buffalo. I got the benefits from my naive mistake.



What things confused me when I first came to the U.S.

Written by Kyoungun Kim.

My first name is Kyoungun, and my last name is Kim. In my country, South Korea, we have our names in the opposite order of name from the U.S. We put 'Kim' is first, and 'Kyoungun' is last. That is why when someone asks me what my first name is, I need time to figure out which name comes first. They usually ask me for my first name and then my last name. However, it depends on the person, some ask me for my Last name first, or use other words like surname and family name or given name. If I meet that kind of person, I become unsure as to which one should be first because I do not know how they are to be used. It's just a simple and obvious question, but telling my name sometimes is a challenge, like "Turn Left" or "Turn Right" when I give or am given directions. Those things still fool me.

II) I was waiting in line to get approval to enter the U.S. at customs at the airport. When my turn came, the officer beckoned me with his palm is facing up and using his index finger. In my country, that sign is appropriate for dogs or other animals, not for humans. It is very insulting to people and causes problems. This gesture has the exact opposite meaning between South Korea and the U.S. That's why that gesture made me uncomfortable, and I didn't get a good first impression. However, I now know it wasn't mean to insult me. Sometimes when I make fun of my husband as a sassy girl, I use this gesture, and I say "I am now in the U.S. so I follow American customs."



United States has a new look!

Written by Glorys Bueno

One of the things that surprised me most when I first came to New Jersey was the diversity of backgrounds. Everywhere you go, you find people from different countries and nationalities asking for and providing services. That was new and unexpected for me. Wrongly, I'd thought diversity was restricted to big American cities like New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco or Miami. I had also not taken into account that New Jersey and New York share spaces that make up the metropolitan New York City area, so there are people flowing every day on both sides.

New Jersey's diversity has helped me feel welcomed in many ways. My initial feelings of loneliness and isolation got better once I began to realize that many before me have adjusted, been welcomed and adapted to living here. In my new group of friends, when I excused myself about my lack of fluency in English, they replied, in a polite and friendly tone, "Don't worry about that. All of us either descend from immigrants or are immigrants ourselves"!

Speaking a little bit about my experiences on a day-to-day basis in the US, I had to learn how to pick between the excess of products found in drugstores or grocery stores. I remember spending too much time reading the labels; nobody in my family wanted to go shopping with me because I always lost time doing this. Nowadays, my eyes have gotten used to seeing a bunch of brands, prices and sizes. I pick things out faster every day but I continue working hard to stay away from the temptation of processed food.

Another aspect of culture shock that struck me was seeing ads for medications meant for serious illnesses on TV. In my culture, not even considering the fact that openly discussing mental health is taboo, you don't really see prescription medication being

advertised and sold to you on TV. I remember thinking, is it normal for people here to ask their doctor to prescribe them medication they discovered while watching TV?

From the outside, I've always seen the US as the land of opportunities, nevertheless, I've learned that Americans work very hard to make sure this is true. They know they can't stop working on making things change for the better. The idea of the promise of America has resonated with me living here. However, as a newcomer, it's been hard to keep up with the rhythm of events. When I compare with my own culture or other countries where I have lived, I find this dynamism really fascinating.

I'm Venezuelan. I've been living in New Jersey since Sep.2018.



My first snowfall while living in New Jersey. Nov. 2018.