

English 180, Third Place; Professor, Dr. Rebekah Buchanan

Journey to America

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Waking up on September 4th, 2001, I didn't realize how much my life would change in a matter of twenty-four hours. At the age of 7, I was trying to comprehend what moving to a new country across the world really meant. My parents sat my sister and me down in the living room with a serious look on their faces. They started talking to us about not seeing a future for us in Greece. They informed us that the education system was far below the criteria they believed a school should meet. That was all I remember from that talk. Two week later, I vividly remember getting on the Swiss airplane and traveling thirteen hours from Athens to Chicago.

Life in the suburbs of Chicago was nothing like life in downtown Athens. I couldn't communicate with any of my classmates or teachers because I didn't speak English. I couldn't go out to play with friends because I didn't have any, and I couldn't grasp the idea of being in a new country because life was so different. I would come home from school on the bus and see my dad crying under the tree that was in the courtyard in front of our apartment complex. He would see me, pretend everything was fine, and wipe away the tears steaming down his face. This happened every day for three years.

As I grew older, I felt the pain my dad felt the first couple of years of being away from his family, and I finally understood why those tears were always rolling down his face. Not seeing my grandparents, uncles, aunts, and cousins started to make me hate being in America. After what felt like years, I was finally comfortable with my new

lifestyle and new environment. I just didn't realize it would take me six years to become accustomed to my new life.

I remember my sister and I translating things for my parents since neither of them spoke English. Some of these things included applying for our green cards, permanent resident cards, and citizenship. Applying for citizenship is a very long process that may take years to complete. We first had to apply for a social security number, get our travel documents, apply for a green card (let five years pass), and then we were finally able to apply for citizenship. Applying for citizenship, I believe, is one of the most powerful processes in true patriotism and American exceptionalism in this country because of all the work and dedication you must put in to gain citizenship.

I remember waiting for my dad to come out of the testing room to see if he passed his citizenship test. He finally walked out one hour later with a saddened look on his face. He informed me that he passed the reading and history sections of the test, but he didn't pass the writing section. The next step of the process was for him to retake the writing section one more time, and if he didn't pass, he would have to repay the \$800 fee and take all the parts of the test again. His retake of the writing section wasn't for two weeks, so we sat down every day and studied for hours.

Teaching my dad the rules of grammar and spelling reminded me of how difficult it was for me to learn after moving from a different country and not speaking the slightest bit of English. I could see my dad struggling to understand all the rules and concepts of the English language. After two long and dreadful weeks passed I found myself back in the waiting room waiting for my dad to come out of that door again. I kept looking up at the clock and it felt like time wasn't passing. I looked at it again, what felt like ten

minutes later, and only one minute had passed. I was so nervous. I felt like I was waiting to find out the result of my test. I could feel my hands clamming up and my body getting tense. My heart was beating so fast, I thought it was going to jump out of my chest. I heard the door creak open and quickly looked toward it, only to see a woman walk out. I started to worry, but just as the door closed, it creaked open again and the hairs on my arms rose. This time it was my dad walking out of the door. With the biggest smile on his face, he walked over to me, gave me the biggest hug, and told me he passed the test.

As cheesy as it sounds, I had never been as proud of anyone in my life. I saw the hard work and dedication my dad put into this prolonged process that made me realize if I try my best at anything, I can succeed. Although this process took a lot of time and effort, the freedoms and rights my dad now has, like voting, are worth the time, money, and work we put into it. Seeing the smile on his face was well worth everything it took us to get there. The reason we moved to America was so my sister and I could get a better education. With the education I received, I was able to help my dad gain citizenship.

For all those who pass the test, there is an oath ceremony a week later that you must attend to become an official American citizen. Looking at my dad during the oath ceremony with his right hand proudly raised, brought tears to my eyes. My dad still lights up when anyone asks him to tell his story about his journey to America. He is so proud to be an American citizen and thanks God every day for the opportunities available to us.

It has been eleven years since I first stepped foot in America. If you were to ask me how I liked it here at age seven I would have said, "I hate it, take me back to Greece." If you were to ask how I like it here now I would say, "Moving here is the best decision my parents ever made for my sister and me." My sister is now in graduate school at the

University of Illinois in Urbana-Champaign continuing her education in architecture, and I am continuing my love for politics and government, which was fostered by this journey, here at Western Illinois University. American exceptionalism is not just something you are born with, it is the pride and joy you get from being an American and everything you are provided with for being a citizen.