

Newark: A Cozy Home To Keep Us Together

The very first time I got off the plane, a smiling airport officer looked at me and said, “My wife always says: Why do so many people come to America? Don’t they realize that we live in an asylum?” Those words really initially disturbed me. “What I am doing here!” I thought. Of course, I knew he just was pulling my leg, but inside, I was suddenly very conscious I was about to live in a place with totally different customs, which wasn’t going to be an easy task. Not just the customs, but how could I get by in a place with a completely different language, manners, weather and culture from mine? Well, it would certainly a long and fraught road ahead. However, it’s definitely a worthwhile one. After all, the United States is a place where immigrants overcame incredible hardships no matter how difficult they may have appeared. Because of that, living as a foreigner so far to your home has been like climbing a mountain. It’s physically and mentally challenging, but easier if you have the right equipment and inspirational support. The best path to get beyond living abroad is not to be afraid of learning the language, overcoming prejudices and finding out the advantages hidden at first sight.

As a newcomer, I hoped to internalize the language without fear of confusion or linguistic cultural misunderstandings. When I began living in Newark, I heard someone to say “What a beautiful day, TGIF!” Sounds good, I thought, and I started to use that expression following everything. “What a delicious food, TGIF! What a wonderful movie, TGIF!” Obviously, some guys teased me every time I said that but, I thought that it was because my accent. A good soul finally set me straight by enlightening me on the actual meaning of TGIF: Thank God It’s Friday. How embarrassing! On another occasion, while debating with some friends about politics

I said “Sorry, on the topic of politics, I am ‘septic’” I spent ten minutes trying desperately to convey that I wanted to say I am a “skeptic”, but of course, my effort was in vain. They mocked me the whole afternoon. These misunderstandings have become part of my natural process of learning English, one that I now confess to actually enjoy. If we want to adapt to another country, we shouldn’t be afraid of making mistakes, which is the best way to learn.

Who doesn’t have prejudices about other countries, other peoples, other cultures? Perhaps everybody has preconceived notions about the unknown. Before coming to Newark I thought “Americans were ethnocentric. That they didn’t look outside their own borders. That they all day watched TV and ate junk food.” I was acting like a grumpy old man confined in a house without windows. Nonetheless, my first evening with my American Homestay, was spent talking about food, music and cultures from around the world. We even danced *Salsa* and ate Indian food! As time went by, I shared time with a lot of locals, and I gradually realized that I was very wrong about my previous idea about “The lazy American”. The reality opened my mind and I found out that the United States is not a place with one culture; it is where many kinds of cultures are embraced and coexist.

Every place in the world, no matter how small, has enormous advantages which are frequently hidden. During my first week living in Newark, I heard some students to say that living here was boring. To be honest, at the beginning I thought the same. What could be interesting in a place with only one main street, a few businesses and a sizable university campus? Well, I found out that those characteristics are precisely what make living here advantageous. If the people live close to each other, you tend to run into them pretty frequently.

This is like a friend told me “A small house keeps the family together.” Well, I have to say that I wholeheartedly agree! Newark is a cozy home where everybody is nearby, and because of that, you can find someone to share your hobbies with! When I understood this, I noticed how many groups are in Newark. There are sports clubs, book clubs, music clubs and many others. Do you want to make films or to learn to dance? Do you want to play video games or go hiking? There are all kinds of clubs for every kind of hobby. There is even those who enjoy dressing up like medieval knights and simulate fights with weapons! It’s amazing! In order to adapt to a new home, we need to take advantage of the particular features that a place provides, and Newark has my favorite one: keeps the community together.

Living as an international in Newark, I learnt to enjoy with my language mistakes, to face my own prejudices and to appreciate the warm life in community. As a Colombian, since I was a child, I used to say that my country was the best one in the world. I love my territory, and I still think Colombia is an awesome place to live. However, that doesn’t mean that other countries are not. In fact, I am convinced that the strongest borders exist in our mind, which sometimes, unfortunately, prevents us from fully experiencing other cultures and customs. I remember now the smiling airport officer’s words about the United States being an asylum, and I couldn't agree more. This is an asylum where the daily craziness of each culture colliding teaches us how to coexist. Where those who dress up like medieval knights share with those -like me- who can’t speak the language very well, and who no longer is afraid of making mistakes, I say, “What a wonderful experience, TGIF!”