

How the maze became my comfort zone

I was entering a café in Cologne when my phone went off and I read the email: “Congratulations on your scholarship with the Federation of German-American Clubs! I am looking forward to welcoming you to the University of Delaware in August.” I swallowed my coffee without tasting it, could not focus on the conversation with my friend who I was visiting- all I wanted to do was go home and prepare for my next school year in the US even though it was still 10 months ahead of me. I would be attending THE university which had the first student exchange program in US history! After hearing about its excellent reputation for international exchanges from an American friend, my decision was made. I wanted to attend a university where I would be able to experience not only American but also other cultures besides reaching a higher proficiency in English for teaching it in German High Schools. UD seemed like the perfect fit!

After having attended UD for one semester now, my time here already holds sentimental value in my heart. Coming from Germany, where the summer semester had just ended a couple of weeks before I left for America, I was thrown into my thoroughly new everyday life in Newark. My housemates took my jet lagged and from humidity sweating self around campus right on the first night because I wanted to explore my new home. While buying magnificent “new” furniture from Goodwill, I got to know my housemates better, who I had just talked to through Zoom before. I must have seemed interested in cars and trustful enough to drive one, so that my housemate handed me his keys to take my new bedframe home by myself. I felt so proud... I could not stop smiling as I drove down the road just like any other American woman. Not only do I usually ride my bike instead of driving a car in Germany but am also a pro at frequent, quick shopping trips for groceries; not here. Simply getting an overview of the choices for Philadelphia cheese took me five minutes, and at ACME, I am still chasing from one end to

the other like a squirrel that catches a sniff of good hazelnuts on every corner. ‘But this is the *feeling of being lost* that you wanted to experience...’, I told myself when realizing I was outside of my comfort zone, ‘... the situations that will shape my personality most’. So, I started putting myself into entirely new settings like open dance classes with the National Honor Society, where- as a surprise for me- everyone else had started dancing at a very young age whereas I was simply interested in learning some steps. I could barely keep up with the ballerina jumps and turns but felt wholly encouraged by the others’ cheering, which is only one example of the way I have experienced Americans expressing appreciation towards my culture and attitude. Whether swimming on the club or reading out my poems to my creative writing class, I felt socially integrated and academically competent. In my Education class, especially, I was given the feeling of making an important contribution to the content as we vividly exchanged knowledge about American and German teaching approaches and the curricular in both countries.

Not only do I feel integrated but also cared about. Only a month after my arrival, I got ill, which turned out to throw me out of my everyday life for the following six weeks. Doctors said that my body was reacting to high stress levels caused by culture shocks and all the new impressions: A different climate, more processed food than in Europe, the new school system and wanting to do well in classes, putting myself under pressure to make friends while still maintaining connections with family and friends back home. My body was acting against me, went from migraines to tonsillitis and to an allergic reaction that caused a swollen skin rash all over my body. I would say that I now know all Urgent Care Centers around, am known at the Student Health Center, and also gained my first experience riding to the ER in an ambulance. Empathetically judging my circumstances, the doctor at the hospital even gave me his number to call him about any prospective health challenges because I do not have a family doctor here.

My housemates and professors were cooperative, and I was able to make up the work at extended dates. Staying in touch with my foreign student advisor felt existential at that time as she could provide me with tips about where to go and what to do. Still, not knowing when I would get better caused me to feel very emotional and more homesick than ever in my life. However, I am now proud of staying on my path despite this difficult time. It gave me a chance to get to know the life at university, UD's resources, and the people around me from an intense but unique perspective.

Tonight, I have a volleyball playoff game with my intramural team. Most of them are students from Columbia and I feel grateful for this new network of friends as I'm cooperating with people from a culture that I have never gotten in touch with before. Our dynamics mesmerize me because both sides constantly realize new aspects about their own culture while trying to understand the other side. Simultaneously, I am gradually identifying with the American culture, which was one of my main goals coming here: I want to be an English teacher that can act as a transcultural speaker in front of their students- someone that acts close to a native speaker in both languages and can identify with both cultures. I cherish my time at the University of Delaware because it provides me with everything I need to reach my goal. I am curious about everything else I will take away during the next remaining five months.