

Far Away from Home, Yet Home

Picture a girl dragging a suitcase twice her size through an airport, holding onto a passport and a dream. That was me leaving Ecuador with one suitcase, one plane ticket, and one YouTube playlist titled “University of Delaware Campus Tour.” I had watched those videos so many times that I could describe every red brick on The Green. I thought I was ready. But no video could prepare me for the moment I stepped off the plane and realized: this was real. I was 3,000 miles away from home, about to start college in a world that felt both exciting and terrifying. Back in Ecuador, universities are different. Everyone commutes, eats dinner with their families, and sleeps in their childhood bedrooms. For me, coming to UD meant learning how to live in a residence hall, study, interact, build a home from scratch.

When I first arrived, I was nervous about classes, sure, but what scared me most wasn’t homework. It was the question: “What if I don’t belong? What if my roommates don’t like me? What if I miss home too much?”. I moved into a triple dorm in George Read Hall, clutching my bedding like it was a safety blanket. My roommates were already there, cheerful and full of energy. That first night, we decided to go to the supermarket to buy bed risers. I’ll never forget standing in front of an entire wall of chocolate, a rainbow of flavors, brands, and sizes I’d only seen on the internet. My roommates bought their favorites for me to try, while I pulled out the snacks I had brought from Ecuador: plantain chips and traditional candies wrapped in bright foil. We sat on the floor that night trading snacks and stories. Me teaching them how to roll their R’s and them teaching me American slang. That was the night our dorm stopped being just a room; it became the start of my first real family at UD.

My first semester quickly filled with memories: game day 101, learning why football has four downs, late-night study sessions that turned into laughter marathons, and movie nights/watching *Dancing with the Stars* every Tuesday. When Halloween arrived, I ordered my costume months in advance, determined to experience the holiday I'd seen so many times on TV. We went to a Halloween party in group costumes and took so many pictures that my mom thought we were in a photo shoot. A few weeks later, missing home, I told my roommates about Carnaval in Ecuador, how the streets fill with laughter, music, and water fights. To my surprise, they organized a mini Carnaval outside our hall, complete with silly string and plastic cups of water. It wasn't home, but it was close. On the hard days, when homesickness crept in, acts like this one, or a simple conversation reminded me that I belonged here. That's when I realized: friendship isn't always about shared origins; it's about shared hearts.

I started to find my rhythm. I no longer needed Google Maps to find my classes. I found my favorite shortcuts across campus, my favorite study spot in the library, and my favorite event: Coffee Hour. Coffee Hour became my weekly adventure. Every Friday, I'd meet people from all over the world. We'd swap stories, languages, snacks, and sometimes even travel tips for our imaginary future trips. I found people who speak Spanish, from Uruguay, Mexico, and even people from the US eager to learn about different cultures. I added places to my bucket list that I hadn't even heard of before, places from Russia, Thailand, Vietnam. I realized that we were on the same boat; being far from home doesn't have to mean being alone.

During spring break, when most students went home or traveled, I joined an Alternative Break trip to Pennsylvania to volunteer with non-profit organizations. For a week, I worked with incredible people dedicated to empowering women and children. By the end of the trip, I realized

something powerful: community can exist anywhere, it's built through empathy, shared effort, and open hearts.

By my second year, I felt ready to give back. I became a Resident Assistant because I wanted to be for others what my own RA had been for me, a friendly face, a helping hand, a source of comfort when everything feels new and strange. Being an RA showed me the invisible network of care that keeps UD running. From organizing paint nights to helping residents through homesickness, I understood how much heart goes into every "Welcome Blue Hens" banner. Move-in day hit differently this year. As I stood helping new freshmen unload their cars, I saw nervous smiles and wide eyes that looked a lot like mine a year ago. I didn't get any international students in my hall; however, at first, I caught myself wondering if any of them were international students feeling the same mix of fear and excitement I once did. If I could've whispered one thing to them, it would've been this: Ask questions. Be brave enough to try. Go to Coffee Hour, even if it's just to grab a cookie (trust me, they're good). Join that club. Visit your professors. Don't be afraid of sharing your roots. Apply for that on-campus job. Every big thing that changed my life here started with one small step.

Being at UD has taught me to redefine "home." It's not just the place you come from; it's the people and experiences that make you feel like you belong. My roommates are home. My Coffee Hour friends are home. My RA team is home. The library at midnight, The Green at sunset, the staff who greet me every morning; all of them are home. UD welcomed me when I was just a scared girl with a suitcase and a dream. Now, I walk through campus feeling grateful, not just for the education I'm receiving, but for the community that shaped me. It gave me a place to grow, to serve, to laugh, and to find a version of myself I never imagined.

Far away from Ecuador, I found something unexpected.

I found home.