PREFACE

The first volume of *Stories of American Rookies*, published in Spring 2013, exceeded so many of my expectations. Originally, the idea behind this project was to provide English Learner students in the Fremont Union High School District a space to give voice to their stories. Before long, students, teachers, parents, and community members alike were requesting additional copies of the collection. Time and time again, they expressed how touching it was to experience the oft-untold stories of such remarkable students. The opportunity to distribute the anthology to Department of Education Secretary Arne Duncan and Congressman Mike Honda at an Equity and Excellence Commission hearing was another unanticipated highlight. Yet, it was the pride and appreciation the writers expressed that lingered most profoundly with me.

In the beginning of the 2013-2014 school year, the Advanced English Language Development (ELD) teachers, Ms. Chelsa Anderson; Mr. Sean Bui; Ms. Stefanie Fan; Ms. Aisha Lomando; Mr. Josh Miller, and I unequivocally agreed that a second volume needs to be compiled and published such that more students can tell their stories. Common amongst the stories in this second edition is the motif of travel. These are stories about trips, sojourns, and journeys – physical, developmental and otherwise. We are thrilled that you, the reader, have chosen to join us for the ride.

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She was crying. She was loudly weeping. “Don’t forget us and try to find time to send us updates about the three of you. Don’t forget about your studies and do well. We love you all,” was all she said, trying to be understood while she was weeping. She’s my most favorite person in the world, my grandma.

“Of course Ma, I will never forget you.”

I wanted to tell her how sad I was. I wanted to tell her how I would be missing her so badly. I was trying my best not to cry but tears suddenly started falling. I never
cried that much before, and it felt like I was keeping those tears the whole time in my eyes. It never stopped falling. She said her goodbyes, and I stood there listening while the sun was setting in front of me.

“Goodbye Ma.” She hung up the phone.

That night was our despedida party. It was the night before us leaving the Philippines. I bathed, wore my clothes and went downstairs. I was happy to see all their faces again. I remembered occasions like these were always held every summer as a way to keep in touch with other relatives, but this might be the last for me in a long period of time. Our aunts, uncles, grandparents and cousins were all there. They were all happy to see us so I had to be happy too.

As one of my cousins played the guitar, we were singing “Leaving on a jet plane” by John Denver joyfully. “All my bags are packed. I’m ready to go. I’m standing here outside your door. I hate to wake you up to say goodbye.” Then everyone was singing the chorus part of the song. Some cousins were playing ping pong, and some were singing in the karaoke machine. Parents were all laughing, singing, eating, and even my dad was jamming with us kids, which he didn’t normally do.

We were singing this lovely song, and I realized that everyone was singing. I stopped singing and watched them sing. My dad was singing, my siblings were singing, my aunts and uncles were singing, my cousins were singing, and even the housekeepers were singing too. They were all singing, smiling and all laughing in unison. Time did not fast forward. It didn’t slow down, but it gave us enough time to spend with each other. The world was infinite. It was heaven.

I never felt that happy before. I never thought it would come at that time when everyone was saying their goodbyes. It was getting late and everyone was exhausted. Tables were cleared. We ran out of songs, and the night was slowly getting quiet. Parents were talking about things that would happen when we got to the United States. There were jokes like “If you kids are gone, who would cook for occasions like this?” and the house was once again filled with laughter. Goodbyes were killing me inside. Everyone left.

The sound of the raindrops falling on the roof woke me up. It was a cold early morning. I was staring at the ceiling, lying on my bed, and I never wanted to get up. Suddenly the door opened.

“You need to get up and get your bags ready now. You might forget something if you pack up late,” said my sister.

I stared at her, and she looked like she was just going on a 7-day trip. I walked towards the door. I saw our bags lying on the floor. They were all set except mine.
Time went by quickly. Bags were all in the car, and everyone was ready to drive us to the airport. It was eight in the evening. The weather was cold due to the non-stop rain. We arrived at the airport. My cousins began crying. Looking at them cry made me cry too. These people were my sisters, brothers and my best friends. This was the group that I belonged to all my life as a teenager. Every great moment of my life was spent with them. We were like leaves on the same branch, like lions in a pride. That night was the end of it for me. Everyone was crying, and everyone was weeping loudly. My dad was crying, my siblings, my aunts and uncles were all crying. I was embracing one person and the other.

After a long time of embracing, crying and saying goodbyes, my siblings and I went inside the airport. I was still crying. As my brother pushed the cart, an attendant came to our way. “Are you passengers of flight PR523?” he asked.

“Yes,” my sister replied.

“You guys were all crying outside. Too much drama,” he added.

“Huh?” my sister was confused. We are all confused.

“Your flight has been cancelled. You will be departing tomorrow but you could check in your baggage.” said the attendant with a smile. We were all laughing.

We exited the airport, and they were all waiting outside. “Well that was fast. How was the trip?” Sometimes my aunt has a great sense of humor.

“What do you want to do?” asked my uncle.

“Let’s go see the movie The Wolverine at the mall,” said one of my cousins.

We all headed back to the mall to watch the movie. It was amazing. I had another great moment with my cousins, another great moment I will never forget.

Now, I still miss them. My grandma, my cousins, uncles and aunties but I know I will see them again, and I will count the days until that time comes. I know we will be reunited again. For now, I’ll focus on things coming my way, and one of those things is my studies.
I came to America two years ago, and I still couldn’t forget the story that happened on the first day of American life, and the excitement I had when I received a phone call from my dad, who was reminding me to pack my things. I got that phone call one night while I was matching my socks and imagining the days in America. After I finished talking with my dad, my mom came into my room, helped me with packing and said, “Son, remember to put everything into the truck. I know you are a forgetful
person. Things you bring with you will not be any safer than if kept them in your luggage.”

“Okay, Mom, I will put them in the luggage,” I said, nodded.

“And remember, when you get to the airport, follow the sign, and...” she started to give me the instruction of how to go from the airport gate to the boarding gate, which I had heard for at least twenty times in the past few weeks.

I didn’t stop her; I just waited silently for her to finish her lecture, and then talked with her for the whole night because I knew that our next conversation might be a year later. In the morning, I headed to the airport in Taiwan. Led by my mom, I went through customs and security checkpoints, and I shopped at some duty-free shops. With a couple of reminders from my mom, I went on the plane and flew to America.

When we finally landed, I was mentally and physically exhausted from the eleven-hour flight. I took out my phone and called my dad to tell him that I’d arrived. I passed the customs easily with the notes my mom wrote me, and everything was fine until I got to the baggage claim area. First, I had waited patiently for twenty minutes, but I did not see my baggage. As the conveyor belt kept running, another ten minutes passed. I started to feel something was wrong, but I decided to keep waiting. Twenty minutes later, when the people who were waiting for their luggage were getting fewer and fewer. I could not stay calm anymore. I mustered my courage and walked up to the airport staff to ask about the lost baggage.

“Excuse me sir, I cannot find my bag. Might it be taken?” I asked, hoping that he could understand my poor English and my strong accent.

“Well, yes, it might be, but maybe it is just the last one to come out,” he replied, without having any problem understanding me.

“Okay.... I will keep waiting, thanks.”

However, it turned out he was wrong; the bag did not come out after more minutes. I called my dad, handed the phone to the staff for my contact information so they could send the bag to me if they found it; then we headed back home. On the way home, I felt deep despair. I had put all of my clothes, daily necessities in my baggage, which meant I had nothing left with me. With the thought of losing everything, I could not stop myself from asking meaningless questions about the baggage: “Dad, am I ever going to get the baggage and the stuff back?”

“Yes you will, probably next week, or even shorter,” my dad said, without any sign of being annoyed by my questions.
I had no way to find it, so I rested all my hope on the airport. At night, I was about to take a shower to wash off my exhaustion. Just when I was relaxing myself, I realized that I had no clothes to change into. So I had to borrow my dad’s baggy clothing, which was really uncomfortable because it was winter. With the shirt my dad lent me, I could feel the wind blowing on every piece of my skin. The same predicament happened when I was going to sleep. I did not have my toothbrush, my cleanser or my pajamas. After everything was settled down, I leaned on the couch, which was my makeshift bed for the night, thinking about the rest of the days of my life in America. That night I had a bad dream.

For the next two days, nothing had changed. One thing that had been changing was my complaint, but even though I griped a lot to my dad, he still treated me with sufferance. As time went by, I started to suspect that the airport would not find my baggage. Just as I was starting to lose hope, the airport called us, saying that they found the person who accidentally took my luggage. We got the luggage right away, and everything was in there, but they had obviously been moved. I was really happy that I could actually get my belongings back along with my suitcase. On the way home, we did not talk, my dad was driving the car with full concentration, and I was checking my stuff. Suddenly, my dad broke the silence by saying this: “Son, I know that this week was very tough for you, but remember this. Do not worry about the things that are out of your control because you cannot change them.”

“How about the things that are in my control? Should I worry about them?” I asked.

My dad laughed, then said: ”If you can decide what the situations will be, then why worry?”

Just from that, I felt like I understood something. I did not have to worry about anything in my life. If things were decided by fate, then what could I do to make myself happier other than by being optimistic? If things were decided by me, then why couldn’t I just work hard to change them to what I want? This realization taught me how to be calm and optimistic in all situations in my life, whether they are good or bad. This realization also motivated me to work hard on everything that I was able to work hard on. Even now, I am still living my life by this principle.
It was one year ago, I remember it like it was yesterday. Moving to the U.S. was our family’s dream - my dream. I never thought it would happen. The moment when my parents told my sisters and me about our move will always be in my memory. It was a Thursday night. We had a family dinner. One month before school ended, I never expected to hear such a thing. We were supposed to have a family vacation that summer.
“Girls, you always wanted to have a vacation in Thailand, right?” My father said, “So, we’re not going there!” We all laughed, “And you always wanted to have a vacation in the U.S., right?” So, we’re not having a vacation there” We were all quiet. “We’re moving there!”

“What!? The first word that came out of my mouth, “Nice joke Dad. Now where are we really going to this summer?”

“Shani, I’m serious....”

I cried. I couldn’t say anything. Just cried. I always wanted to live in the U.S. It had always been my dream. I just didn’t think it would actually come true. I called my best friend. She came to my house immediately.

“Maya,” I cried, “I’m moving to California....”

We both sat on my bed and cried for a long time. We’re like sisters; it was hard to understand that we were going to be separated.

So, everything started. The whole mess of packing. We didn’t take a container. Everyone of us had to take his own suitcase. My father, mother, both of my sisters Dana and Maya and me. At first, it was hard to choose what to take and what to leave behind. I was curious about what was waiting for me in California. I was scared of the unknown. I had mixed feelings about the move. At first, I didn’t want to move at all. After a while of processing the idea, I changed my mind and started to love the idea of moving. The hardest thing for me was saying goodbye. I will never forget the moment when I told my friends I was moving, the moment when my teacher announced that I was moving to the U.S, the reaction on my friend’s faces.

“I hate goodbyes,” I told my friends. “That’s the hardest thing for me,” I cried. I spent as much time as I could with my friends and family.

“Even though I know in my mind that I’m going to move, I can’t really understand it,” I thought to myself.

My friends threw me a surprise party so I could say goodbye to everyone and have fun with them for the last time.

The big day came. The thirty-first of July. I remember perfectly, my closest friends and I, sitting in my best friend’s backyard, hugging, crying, trying to make the moment last. We said our last goodbyes and there I was, ready to start my new life. My whole family and my best friend were with me until the last moment before going to the airport. It was the hardest goodbye in my life, but I was ready for California.

We landed in California on August first.

“Welcome to your new life,” I thought to myself.
At the beginning, it felt like a vacation. When the time had passed, I started to understand that I was not going back home soon. I had talked to my friends everyday.

“I miss you! Just come back already! I can’t even imagine what school is going to be without you,” my best friend Maya told me on the phone.

I started to think about it. What is school going to be like without my friends and in English.... I was nervous.

We traveled in the area, visited family that we had in California, and enjoyed the last weeks of summer. All this time I just tried to forget that school was about to begin, but the days passed and school started. I woke up in the morning very nervous. When my mom dropped me off at school, I wanted to run away and hide behind her. This feeling was new to me, not to know what was going to happen.

“Will I ever find new friends?” I asked my mom, “and what if I’m not going to like it here?”

“Don’t worry,” she told me. “Just be yourself.”

School started and I made a lot of new friends. I kept on talking to my friends in Israel. We have always stayed in touch, as if I never left. The language was one of the hardest things I had to deal with at the beginning. I learned English in Israel, but a new language and culture are always hard. With time, I got used to California and to the fact that this is my new home. I felt happy. I have learned so many new things about myself, had gotten closer to my parents and sisters, have experienced new things, learned how to work hard and overcome difficulties. I proved to myself that I can do whatever I want if I believe in myself.

New beginnings are hard. The unknown is scary. I know that as long as I stay positive and give my best, everything will turn out just fine. I love California, the language, my home and friends here. I know Israel will always be a part of me, but here is also my home and will always be.
“It’s time to say goodbye, but remember we will always be there to encourage you.” This was what my classmates told me about one and a half years ago when I left China. Everything was different then. I had many friends of many years, my favorite cousin who I share every secret with, not to mention a familiar environment. Then of course, there are my classmates whose company I enjoy tremendously.
The day before I left China, my teacher decided to throw a farewell party for me. I was really glad because the entire class period was used in my name! Of course, what I didn’t appreciate as much was having to say goodbye.

Before the bell, my best friend came by and was so excited. “Oh my god, Ms. Wang is actually using an entire period for you!” Lucy gasped and said, “Because it’s almost the final exam, sometimes she even “borrows” time from other subjects for us to study. But this? Never.” I laughed looking at her surprised face. Jessie rolled her eyes at me and sighed, “If we do badly on the examination, blame it on Ritta.” Her serious expression made me laugh even harder and caused me almost to fall to my feet.

“What’s so funny?” Another girl named Selina came by and asked. When I tried to explain, I realized there was nothing laughable. It’s just that I’m so glad to see them around me and to chat as if nothing was going to happen.

At the beginning of that period, Ms. Wang spoke for a long time about me. She said I did a lot for our class, always received good grades, was really helpful, and so on. Eventually I was getting bored, so I started moving around. I knew she was praising me, but teacher speeches are never interesting. After that I remembered that she was doing this all for me! That totally showed how much she cared about her students, so I quickly turned back to the front and began paying more attention to the speech.

Finally, she stopped her long “interesting” speech, but unfortunately, she wanted me to say something instead. “Ritta, come on up. I know you have a lot to say to everyone in this classroom. Go ahead.” I was already a little emotional by then. When I tried to think of a few words, I realized that there was nothing joyful, so I started crying in front of all the people! To this day, I still feel shameful of how I behaved.

Soon, I calmed down and started talking, “I, I don’t know. It’s just that I really do not want to leave all of you. I had a great time with you and I don’t even know if I’m ever going to meet people like you in the future. Thank you for all the happy memories.” Even though I only said a mere few words and I know they sounded childish and stupid, everyone clapped. They were shouting and waving. I felt awful and started crying again.

After the speaking part, my teacher asked every girl to hug me and every boy to say a few words to me. It was very touching and everyone got tears on their faces. Some girls, and boys, gave me letters. When everyone had spoken to me, they asked me to step out of the classroom for a while. My friend acted so mysteriously. Jessie whispered in my ear, “Just wait outside for a huge surprise!” I chuckled. We were not little kids anymore. What were they going to prepare for me? Cards?
Those few minutes of waiting felt like years. Finally Lucy opened our classroom door into a little crack, waved at me and said, “We are done. Come inside.” When I looked into the classroom, my mouth dropped open.

Four tables were put together. On the middle of tables was a sentence made up of cupcakes. It read, “It’s time to say goodbye, but remember we will always be there to encourage you.”

I burst into tears again, but this time it was because of joy. I was so glad I have had these people for classmates since elementary school. We started eating soon. Those cupcakes were green tea flavored - my favorite. There were exactly 42 cupcakes, which is the number of students plus Ms.Wang.

The bell rang and I had a wonderful time. That afternoon, I invited some of my friends to have dinner together. No one was crying anymore, and they were all congratulating me. I started looking forward to my life in America. What’s there to be afraid of? I have my friends to support me.

Things changed and I made new friends here in America, an environment that I’m still getting used to, and many classmates who I’m unfamiliar with. Even though I would not see my old classmates often in the future, I will remember them forever.
Life in a new county is different and exciting. Sometimes it’s also difficult. There is a new language, new food, new school, new friends, and memories of home that will never go away.

“Be a strong girl and never give up on yourself,” said my grandpa with some tears and a forced smile on his face. I still remember so clearly the date: January 26th, 2011. It had become an important time in my life because I had to start a journey to a surreal place called the United States.
Two months prior. It was dinner time, and my mom surprisingly prepared many dishes for us.

“Wow, Mommy. Is today a special day?” I asked her quizzically.

“Well, later, I’ll announce some great news to you guys!” Mom said it with great excitement while holding an appetizing dish in her hand.

My sister and I looked at each other and shrugged because it’s pretty unusual for my mom to cook five dishes instead of the usual two. It seemed like a celebration.

“Mommy, what’s the big news? C’mon Mom, don’t be so suspenseful,” my sister said impatiently.

“Haha! We’re leaving soon to the United States.”

“What?!” We all paused for a second.

“Don’t lie Mom. You must be kidding,” I said with doubt.

“No. I’m not. We’re heading off to Beijing in about two months. So you guys better start packing,” Mom said.

I suddenly didn’t know how to describe the feeling when I heard the news. Should I be happy? After all, I’ll go to a place that will be full of freedom and achievement. Should I be sad? I’ll leave my friends, my country, and my relatives behind.

It was Christmas Day of 2011. I sent each of my friends a neatly written card. That’s odd because I had never given them any gift for Christmas. Well, I’ll say that this year was pretty special because we might seldom see each other again in the future. The long distance would be an obstacle between us.

Coming to America was such a bittersweet journey for my family and me. After we had gone through all the formal immigration procedures, we were waiting at home until the actual departure date of January 26th, 2011. Our flight was at night; I still remember the image of all my aunts, cousins, and uncles gathering in my grandpa’s house to send us off to the airport. It was unforgettable because that was the last time our family was together. Anyway, it’s unbelievable that I haven’t seen my grandpa for approximately three years, which means that he is eighty-six years old now.

I was just about to leave. Meanwhile, I hugged my grandpa tightly and we were whispering to each other.

“Grandpa, I gotta go to a place where you really want me to go,” I said it to him.

“Tongxin, try hard and study as much as you can. No matter how much time passes, you’ll always be the best in my mind forever,” said my grandpa.

“Alright... I will. More important is that you take care of yourself. I know you’re eighty-four now. Please wait for me because I’ll be back someday.”
Afterwards, I got into the car. When I looked through the window, I saw my
grandpa was smiling amiably to me. On the way to the airport, tears were streaming
down my cheeks. At that moment, nobody knew how I felt. My grandpa was the most
important family to me. We had lived together since my birth. Now, I shall say good-
bye to him. The only way that I can show my affection is to study hard in the US and
contribute to society.

Finally, we arrived at the airport. Our flight was at 8PM. It was already dark out-
side; we were waiting for the announcement to board the plane. I stared at the rain out-
side. The weather seemed like a combination of fall and winter because it was Janu-
ary. I was really depressed because I should say goodbye to China, which was full of
childhood memories.

While waiting for the plane to take off, I was appreciating the magnificent noctu-
rne of the city. All the lights seemed like twinkling stars. I was sitting next to my
mom.

“Mommy, how does the US look?” I asked curiously.

“It’s an independent place. Freedom is their symbol. And the education there is
way better than any other country. Additionally, it’s FREE,” said my mom.

“Sounds like I’ll like it!”

“You will dear. Life there would be more comfortable,” said Mom while I was
about to fall asleep.

I didn’t know how many hours had passed; it was daytime when I woke up and I
heard a voice saying, “We’re finally here!” My curiosity couldn’t be contained any-
more; I soon looked outside through the window. I saw many yellow squares on this
land because it’s San Francisco - a golden city.

“Mom, where are we?” I asked.

“We’re in San Francisco,” Mom replied.

After we had gone through immigration and security, we walked outside the air-
port. My aunt picked us up and took us to her house. In the car, I kept staring outside. My first impression of the US was the pleasant weather. There were a lot of things that
looked great to me. Here we are, America, our destination.

We will start our new lives here. The first week here was okay for us because we
resided in my aunt’s house temporarily. However, about one month later, we had so
much trouble finding a place to live, getting a car, and dealing with the most intracta-
ble problem - the language. Additionally, I had heard many people say that, “If you
don’t have a car in America, it’s just like you don’t have feet.” That means if we don’t
have a car, we can’t really go anywhere, and my parents could only look for a job nearby.

That was February 28th, which was my first day of school. My first day in an American high school was terrible. I walked to school by myself. I didn’t know which room to go to, nor could I speak English. I couldn’t talk to anyone, and I am a shy girl anyway. I walked in the hallway and saw all the people I didn’t know. I was afraid, and I couldn’t understand a word.

I went to class and sat in the corner. The teacher gave the students three or five minutes to discuss something. Everyone gathered with their friends and talked. I sat alone in the corner. Nobody asked about me or talked to me. One time I cried in class. Nobody knew it because I hid my tears. I tried not to cry and told myself that I had to learn English because I may live here for a lifetime. Although everything was new to me, I had to adopt and confront any difficulties.

Language is such an obstacle when you want to accomplish something. When I was a newcomer, I couldn’t express the questions I had in ceramic and geometry class. I felt totally down on myself. During that time, I struggled a lot with writing compositions and communicating with other classmates. Likewise, my dad had encountered the same circumstances. He couldn’t speak English at all, so the only job he could find was a low-waged job. Due to the fact that he neither had a car nor could speak English, finding a job was such a difficulty. He was really depressed because he is the breadwinner of the whole family.

It’s been three years so far; we’ve overcome some problems. At least our lives aren’t as tough as before. I have a lot of friends now, and I don’t have any problem communicating with other classmates. Even though my writing isn’t the best, at least I can express my ideas in English and teachers are able to understand it. Everything is getting better as time goes on.

I really appreciate that I met a lot of nice teachers here at Fremont, such as Mr. Arndt, Ms. Tanaban, Ms. Walton, Mrs. Potter, etc. They’ve been helping me a lot with my English. Their contributions are seemingly small, yet you may not know the powerful force behind them and how they would determine who we become in life.

For my future, I plan to enroll in a community college. Then, after two years, I plan to transfer to a UC in order to get a higher degree. I’d like to apply to a major related to biology because I want to become a nurse learning to be patient and compassionate when taking care of other people, especially those with disabilities. I know that the pre-requirement for my plan is to earn a high school diploma by trying my best in every class. I know my goal can be realized step by step. And it starts here and now.
I was sixteen and a half when I left Israel. I remember that day like it was yesterday. Many of my friends came to my house to say goodbye and they stayed at my house until the moment I left. I didn’t know how to say goodbye to them. This was not just goodbye; it also meant the start of a new life without my closest friends, separated from my past and the familiar things in my life.

Before I knew it, I was leaving Israel. I couldn’t believe the day had come. I don’t know how I found myself in the middle of the airport saying goodbye to the most im-
portant people in my life—my brothers. With no idea where I was going, what I was going to face, and what I should expect, I felt a sense of emptiness.

Before long, my parents and I boarded the plane. My father said, “This is it.” The moment the plane took off I finally felt like I was really leaving. I sat next to a window; the view was amazing. The sunrise was beautiful, but I wasn’t there. A wave of sadness washed over my heart. I tried to convince myself that I was going to come back to Israel soon. The thought that I would not see my friends and my family for a long time flooded my head. I tried to imagine the situation as a very long vacation. But this vacation was different; my job will be to learn as much as I can, do my best, meet new people and see a new world.

We landed at JFK airport. It was packed. It felt like sitting in rush hour traffic in San Francisco. We couldn’t move. The weather was rainy which caused many flights to be canceled. People were stuck at the airport. Our flight was also delayed. Every time we checked the flight schedule we saw that we were delayed by another hour. After checking many times and 5 hours of waiting, the flights began to depart and more and more people left. Meanwhile, my mom decided that we had to move to a better place so we could be closer to the departure board and gate. While we were walking my father heard an Israeli family speaking Hebrew. He said, "I am pretty sure they were with us on the same plane from Israel."

My mom answered, "They look bored just like us."

We decided to sit next to them and we began to chat. We found out that we have common friends from Israel and that we are going to be neighbors. What a coincidence!

They gave us information about life here: what school to go to, things to do after school, where most of the Israeli families live, and phone numbers of Israeli families with kids my age. After two hours of a good conversation that helped us a lot, we started to think about life in California.

I went to check the flight schedule and I saw that we had thirty minutes until the flight. My father said, “I don't feel well, I have to go to the restroom.” When my father came back he looked shocked and pale, his face was white like the wall.

My mom asked him, "Is everything okay?"

He ignored the question and answered, "The food that they served on the flight wasn't good for me."

"We have another fifteen minutes till the flight." I said.
"I think I will go to the restroom because I don't like the restroom on the plane," my mom said. After my mom came back she said to us, "How people behave here!!? Someone threw up in the sink of the restroom! And that is disgusting!!"

My father answered shyly, "That was me.... I didn’t feel well and the men’s restroom was closed because they were cleaning it... I couldn’t hold it in, so I ran to the women’s restroom and all the stalls were taken. So, I threw up in the sink. Then, an old lady came in and started to yell at me, ‘Get out of here!!!’ I didn’t have time to clean the sink....”

My mom and I couldn’t stop laughing.

Finally, after seven hours of waiting in the airport we boarded the plane with a big smile on our faces, with friends we made for life, and with a funny story to tell the next generation, or to my ELD class.
I still remember what my grandfather told me. He said, “Cindy, don’t be someone with a very limited outlook and experience; you should venture out to see the world!” When my grandfather said that to me, I was 11 years old. After that, I told my grandfather that I promise him someday I will go see how beautiful the world is; then I will come back to tell him about it. Honestly, I really didn’t know what it means, but I think this trip helped me to understand the actual meaning that my grandfather wanted me to understand.
In June, my family and I decided that we were going to Yosemite National Park. That night, my dad was watching TV like he usually does, and my sister and I were using our computer and iPads to find a hotel and the places we were going to see and visit. We decided to spend two nights in a hotel, so we needed to find a comfortable and large hotel to stay in. At the same time, my mom was trying to use her phone to make the reservation. During the day before we went to Yosemite, my mom was packing our stuff and preparing water and food for us to bring in the car. My sister and I were very excited about it, but what was my dad doing? He was sleeping, because he’s going to drive about 4-5 hours without sleep tomorrow. The next day which was July 27th, my family and I woke up at five, and we quickly brought all the stuff into our car. It was very exciting.

Then my sister asked me, “Is Yosemite beautiful like the pictures we saw on the internet and are there a lot of waterfalls and lakes?”

“I think Yosemite is more beautiful than the pictures that we saw on the internet, but you might not see the waterfall. I think there are a lot of lakes and rivers that you can play in,” I answered immediately.

After five hours of driving, we finally got into Yosemite National Park. We were not tired, but we were excited. The first landscape that we saw was Yosemite Falls. It was very beautiful, but too bad there was no water.

“Cindy, you are lying to me. You said there would be a lot of water that I can play in, but now, there is no water,” my sister said in an angry voice.

Then I told her, “I am not lying to you that this is my first time in Yosemite. Also there is global warming on earth, so there is no water.”

Then we started to fight. After a few minutes, my mom asked us to stop.

The next landscape that we saw was Bridalveil Falls, and the same thing happened, no water, but there were lots of people there. I think they all wanted to see the waterfall; too bad there was no water. After we visited the fall, we saw a blue jay. It was so cool; that was the first time my family and I saw a blue jay. Finally, we decided it was time to go to our hotel. On the way to our hotel, we saw a river; it was really clean and beautiful, and we saw a lot people who parked next to the river and went down to play in the water. My family and I love to play in water and see beautiful views around the lake, river, or ocean, so we all decided that we too would park next to the river and go down to play and see the view. It was really cold, but I felt so comfortable. I think I felt comfortable because it was summer and it was hot. When we arrived at our hotel, which is located in Fresno, we rested. The next day, we got to the third site, which is Yosemite Tunnel View. We took our family picture there; it was so beauti-
ful; we also saw El Capitan and Half Dome. They were beautiful, both a large stone sitting majestically. I heard from other people that we can actually climb to the top, but we didn’t try. Instead of climbing up, we decided to look at the view for a bit longer. After that, we returned to the hotel. It was such a really long drive, taking about two to three hours. On the last day, we also woke up early, so we could go inside Yosemite Park early. The first site that we saw was Olmsted Point; it was really beautiful and cool, and I really liked this place because from this place, I could see all the views in Yosemite. After that, we went to a huge lake and played in the water, and took a family picture. Finally, we finished our Yosemite trip, and we spend four to five hours to get back home. That was my trip to Yosemite.

During these four years since coming to America, I have grown up quite a lot. In these years, I think all things have changed. Now that I am 15 years old, I know so much now. I even understand what my grandfather told me. And now I finally understand what my grandfather really wanted me to understand. Seeing what the real world looks like and knowing more about this world are really important. That way, I could get to know the world or nature around me better. That was what I learned during this trip.
“Wow! Are you sure this city is built in the desert? This is too beautiful to be the desert,” I exclaimed.

“I know, right? It’s shinier and fancier than San Jose. I want to live here,” my brother said.

“No, San Jose is the safest town in the world. We are never going to move,” said my mother.
There it was - the city of desert, the city of gambling, the city of Las Vegas. My family and I decided to drive to Las Vegas even though it was more than a ten-hour drive because we thought the charge for our flight would cost too much. The bright and shining buildings in Las Vegas caught our eyes as soon as we took our first step in Las Vegas; however, my family and I were too tired. Right after we arrived at the hotel we all went to sleep even before unpacking our loads.

The next day, my family and I went to see a show called *The O Show*, one of the most famous shows in Las Vegas. The show began with a clown who knew how to make people laugh without any words. He held up both his hands leading the audience to clap. He repeated the actions and at the end, he only raised one hand; the audience, including me, did not know what to do because nobody was able to clap with one hand. After the clown exited, a person came down to the stage from the ceiling. The person and others dove from over 30 feet without splashing a large amount of water; they were all beautiful.

On the next day, after having breakfast, I was wandering around the slot machines and betting games just to see how people gamble and place bets. I was standing next to a slot machine and looking around because it was my first time seeing such a thing. Also, I did not even know it was illegal for me, a 14-year-old, to be around this gambling machine.

One of the workers came up to me and said, "How old are you?"
"I'm fourteen years old," I said proudly.
"Sorry, but you can't be around these machines then," said the worker politely.
That was a good lesson. Don't loom around any gambling machines.
On the same day, my family and I walked around Las Vegas and found out that there was a water fountain show at night. The water was amazing. They reflected the colors from the lights under the water. The water had many different colors. They also had different shapes - curved, curled, etc. Especially because the weather was so hot, looking at the fountain cooled me down.

Hot weather, and a lot of walking surely made my family and me exhausted. The most tiring part of our trip was the ten-hour drive back home after visiting Las Vegas. However, it was really worth it because my dad barely got days-off at that time, so the weariness didn't really affect our fun.

Our trip to Las Vegas was meaningful and fun because we watched shows and plays that we had never seen, such as *The O Show* and the water fountain show. I learned a lesson. Never wander around slot machines until the age of eighteen. Even
though it was exhausting to ride in a car for ten hours, it was a memorable trip with my dad, who hardly gets any days off. I loved the trip to Las Vegas with my family!
I could feel the cool air blowing against my body. I yawned while rubbing my eyes and began staring out the window. The buildings and cars outside seemed so small to my eyes, when suddenly a big cloud covered them. After a while, the cloud disappeared and the buildings and cars appeared again. Obviously, I am in a plane and right now I am thinking about the reason why I am here. Just one week ago, my mom suddenly told me we’re going to visit Korea during the summer of my fifth grade year. I couldn’t express my feelings immediately, because I had always dreamed of the day I
could go there and I never thought that day would come so fast. Finally, I started getting ready for that trip and entered the airport with my parents. Once there, I became really excited to get to Korea.

Korea is one of the most remarkable countries in the world. It's also one of strongest countries in the world because it developed from a poor and weak nation to a more advanced and industrial nation. Even when I was in elementary school, I began dreaming about the day I could go to Korea to either travel or study. This dream came true so fast, that I couldn’t even imagine it.

After about one and half hour in the airplane, I felt kind of uncomfortable because I was airsick. However, once I came out of the airport, all the malaise suddenly left my body because I was in the capital city of Korea, Seoul! White was the color to describe the view that I was facing. Korea was so clean. The clothes that the people wore were also clean and tidy. The ground also seemed so clean. I couldn’t find any trash, and the sky was so clear, filled with white clouds. This view made me love this country more. The guide, who we found at the airport, was Korean, but he could speak fluent Chinese. When I met him the first time, I thought that he would be a nice guide because he wore a clean suit with a tie, and he was always smiling. With his guidance, we went to a place to learn how to make Kim chi. He told us that Kim Chi is one of the most representative foods in Korea. The reason is that Kim Chi is not only easy to make but it is delicious. If I could use a color to describe it, then it must be red because Kim Chi is very spicy, so red, which symbolizes a red chili. The whole time there was always a teacher showing us how to make it in the correct way. First, we put the spicy sauce on the vegetables that they gave us. Then, we twisted the vegetables carefully because twisting them too hard may break the vegetables and they would go to waste. After we were done, we put them into a plastic bag.

That night, we went to the hotel for dinner.

The next morning we went to see the waterfall in Seoul. It was in a park, which had stores, a forest, and bridges. The waterfall was not too big, but it still gave people a relaxing feeling. The fresh water flowed slowly from the mountains; we couldn’t even wait to drink some. Of course, we also took many photos.

My dad said, “The air is so fresh and clean! I enjoy it so much.”

I took a deep breath and answered, “Yeah! It’s extremely fresh. It’s actually much better than China. I like it, too!”

Before we left the waterfall park, we went to find a souvenir store. When we got there we saw many people lining up to buy the souvenirs.

My mom yelled, “Wow! So many cute things, I must buy some!”
“Yeah! I agree,” I said looking around. “Everything here is all really beautiful and colorful.” There were many kinds of decorations. Most of them were all made based on the model of the island’s protector. Finally, after looking around, we bought candies and decorations.

We went to a Korean buffet after that. The buffet was not too big, but there were still many good things to eat such as Kim chi, Korean cooked rice, noodles, sushi and so on. Seeing the different kinds of foods I couldn’t control myself; I got a large plate and got as much food as I could. Finally, I couldn’t even move because my stomach was completely filled with food.

The next place was really fun to go, which was the Wark villa. It’s a six-star hotel, which has first class service and environment. There, we watched a Korean traditional dance show about a Korean couple who fights against a monster to get together again. There were five scenes to the show, and the themes for each part were flower, water, fire, wind, and gold. The auditorium had comfortable seating and modern acoustics, so it attracted the audience to get into the story of the show. For the show, I wanted to use pink to describe it because most of the dancers in the show were wearing pink and their glorious dancing skills and gestures clearly demonstrate the beauty of women. Also, during the show, we could take delicious food from the tables beside us at any-time.

The next day we went to Hoehyeondong for shopping. Hoehyeondong is the largest place for shopping, and people can buy the most popular things in Korea such as clothing, stationary, and k-pop CDs. I went there to find cool Korean stationery, notebooks, pens, and pencils. I went to a store named BCX, too. It’s a big stationery store, but I took half an hour to find that store because Hoehyeondong is too big. I wanted to buy many things there, so I wanted to get to that place without giving up.

However, since sad things will inevitably come when one feels too happy, it was my last day in Korea.

At night, my parents and I finished packing up and went to the international airport by bus. During the time that I spent on the bus, I thought a lot. Night time in Seoul was so beautiful, thousands of street lights were shining, they also seemed to feel sad about my leaving, but I hoped one day that I would have a chance to come to this fantastic place again.
People say, “Teamwork can lead to success.” After all, two minds are better than one. After the Yosemite National Park science field trip with my classmates from Warren E. Hyde Middle School last year, I learned the true meaning of this philosophy. My meaningful experience played an essential role in shaping me to be the type of person who lives out the value of teamwork.

On a clear Saturday morning, along with 137 excited eighth graders, I departed from the confines of Warren E. Hyde Middle School to head to Yosemite National
Park. Each student, with their iPhones and Androids in hand, boarded the yellow buses one by one. Like a bunch of young kids ready to enter Great America, it felt as though a fantastic party was just about to start. Students organized themselves into their respective groups and the chattering, laughter, and jokes began. The party had officially started. Halfway into the long trip, we had a restroom break at one of the big gas stations.

When I got into the restroom, there was a very long line and we yelled, “Can you hurry up? We have to get back on the bus and we can’t hold it anymore!”

The restroom door opened and it was the driver from our bus.

He said, “Can you stop talking because you guys are too noisy.” We got very quiet because we did not expect to see the driver.

After 4 hours of lock down in the bus, which felt like eternity, we finally arrived at Crane Flat. I breathed in the clean, fresh Yosemite air and exhaled. My first taste of independence tasted sweet. I felt the slosh of the icy snow, the beanstalk looking trees, and the jagged, rugged mountains that filled the park. It was silent except for the sound of birds chirping and the streams flowing peacefully across the creek. Yosemite looked heavenly.

The first day at Yosemite with my bunk mates was filled with laughter. My roommates and I were like the Three Stooges. Simple tasks, such as lighting the stove, proved to be harder than any academic test. In Yosemite, the stoves need to be lighted with wood. But my three roommates and I had the brilliant idea of using a chemical powder extinguisher, thinking it was the ignition powder. We then rationalized that adding oil would do the trick. Imagine the chaos that could have occurred. Thankfully, though, our P.E. teacher stopped us and lit the stove for us.

Yosemite started to become more about a lesson on teamwork. During our trip, we prepared to climb one of the most intimidating looking mountains that I ever saw. It looked as if Mt. Everest was staring right at us. We started the hike and it wasn’t so bad in the beginning. Everyone was having a jolly time. Halfway through our hike, as we stopped for lunch, we faced a big problem. The gray clouds started to come in like unwanted visitors. They hovered over us like a massive headache that just wouldn’t go away.

One girl in our group said, “It’s too cold out here.” Our hiking group instructor then told her to wear a jacket, but she said, “I don’t have a jacket.”

My friend asked her “What are you wearing under the jacket?”

She responded “Only one T-shirt.”
When we heard her response, our situation looked bleak, because some of the group members did not have any extra jackets. Nobody brought extra clothes in order to reduce the weight of each person’s backpack.

So I gave her my raincoat and she said, “Thank you.”

When we ate lunch, we voted to decide whether we should finish climbing to the top of the mountain. Everyone wanted to return to the hotel, where a hot shower, clothes, and a warm meal awaited us. We decided to take a vote. During the vote, I did not say anything because I’ve always believed there is no such things as “I” in team. Some of the group members still argued with each other because of the decision we made. Still, I felt good about our group’s decision to go back safely to the hotel instead of threatening the group members’ lives to hike to the top of the mountain.

As we continued our journey, we kept pace with the person who felt the most tired and weary. We wanted to reduce the possibility of unexpected accidents like blacking out or getting injured. It was a grueling process, but we kept going and made sure nobody stayed behind. Breathing heavily and dragging our feet, we finally made it back to our cabins. I exhaled and enjoyed this sweet moment. I could tell we all felt proud to have made it home.

From this experience, I learned that staying with the group will lead to success. If we help each other out, and leave nobody out, the power of teamwork can prove to be more powerful and sturdy than any hiking boot. Through this experience, I also created new friendships. Yosemite was much more than just a trip. I learned a valuable lesson about life and the importance of staying with the group no matter how difficult or demanding a task can be.
The most beautiful, amazing place in the whole world, which no one will ever regret after going there, is located in the western United States and is called Yellowstone National Park. This summer, my family went to Yellowstone for nine days, which included five days of driving. It is hard to believe that we actually drove there because there are a total of a thousand miles from San Jose to Yellowstone; even the driver, my dad, couldn’t believe it.

After many hours, we arrived at Salt Lake City.
“Dad, why do they have piles of snow during summer? That is so awkward,” my brother asked.

Dad replied, “Well, look at it carefully once more, and tell me what you see?”

“It looks like salt, but I thought we are not close to the sea?!”

“Well, you are right. This is salt, and that is very unique. Isn’t it?”

This place is famous because they have a lake that is salty, therefore, they sell large amounts of salt. The city is lively and lots of people live and work there. That night, we slept in a hotel in Salt Lake City, and then we left the next morning.

Two days later, we arrived at Yellowstone National Park. This is a big park located mostly in Wyoming and some of Idaho, Montana, and Colorado. We entered at West Yellowstone, which is more popular than East Yellowstone. We started our Yellowstone trip with a bear. At that time, there were lots of people gathering around and lots of cars parked on the side of the road, we were wondering what had happened.

A friendly lady saw us, and she said, “Did you see the bear next to the bushes?”

“What?! A bear?” I replied with amazement.

“Yeah, I think the security personnel will come soon, so go take some pictures before they come,” she said with a smile.

“Alright, thanks a lot.”

“No problem.”

This is my first time seeing a bear at such a close distance. It was incredible because lots of people who have been to Yellowstone many times still have not seen a wild bear, but we were lucky that we saw it right away. In an instant, the security personnel came, so I just randomly took one quick shot of it and went on our trip. Soon after, the sun started to fall behind the mountains. After a dinner of cup noodles we brought, we camped inside Yellowstone. At night, my brother kept asking to buy wood for the campfire, but my mom refused.

“No, fire is too dangerous,” my mom said.

“Oh, come on. I promise that I won’t do anything like burning the entire forest. I am a boy scout and I know how to use the fire,” my brother pleaded.

Finally, my dad said something, “Well, since this is the first time we come here, then we shall have fun. Also, we might only come here once because the driving is too tough.”

“I have no interest in that; you guys make the decision,” I said.

Therefore, my brother and my dad went to buy wood, and we had a nice campfire. While the flame was dancing, we heard someone playing saxophone. He played it so well that I enjoyed it until the music was off. That night was so sweet.
The next morning we slept until ten, and we just realized that everyone in the campsite was gone except for us. This day was the main part of this trip. Yellowstone has lots of geysers, and the most famous one is the “Old Faithful Geyser.” Old Faithful Geyser shoots water up to about two to three stories high, and it constantly erupts every one to two hours. We didn’t know that, so we just waited there.

“How long have we been waiting?” my brother asked impatiently.

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“Suddenly, I heard a big sound behind me. The sparkling water shot into the blue sky with steam surrounding it. The geyser that we had been waiting for so long finally erupted. It was just like the water in the fire hydrant had too much pressure, and it finally broke through and gushed. Even though we sat far away from the Old Faithful Geyser, we could still feel the cold water hitting our face. It lasted for about a few minutes. I felt glad that I didn’t go away; otherwise I would have missed this moment. After that, we looked at all the different kinds of geysers, including the one that was on the ground that looked like an endless hole. In the afternoon, we went to see the waterfall. It was gigantic with multiple levels. My dad was crazy to have us walk almost every trail.

“Let’s walk this trail; this goes to the lower fall,” my dad said it excitedly.

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“On the last day, we said goodbye to this beautiful place. After taking lots of pictures of Yellowstone National Park, we took a last look at it and went back. On the way back, we went past the “Snake River Canyon.” It was a small canyon that cut through the land with a river down the canyon, and there were people living down there. It
wasn’t wide so they built a highway above it, but it was really long. Taking a look at it, I noticed that the endless river with the endless valley that curves into a snake-like shape. It was magnificent.

The Yellowstone trip was so impressive that I saw lots of things that were new to me. I was very glad I could have this trip. I also learned some lessons from the trip: “If you don’t wait, you will get nothing.” Since I waited for one hour, I saw the largest geyser eruption in the world. I felt like it was worth it. This was such a great trip that I will never forget, and it will be my best memory. Also, my dad had promised that he will never ever drive to Yellowstone again. He was freaking out! If I have the chance, though, I will drive there and visit it again because I just couldn’t forget all the special things in the park.
To begin with, I was nine years old but I was about to turn ten. I was scared of traveling the long journey to our destination. I am never going to forget when I first found out I was going to come to the United States. We were planning on only coming for three weeks to visit my family, but when we were about to return to Mexico, my father called my mother and said that we had gotten a job and that we were going to stay here for the rest of our lives. My mother, brother and I had never been to the USA be-
fore. This was our first time here. On the other hand, my father had been here for 36 years! My brother arrived here when he was 3 years old.

“Wake up,” Mom said. “It’s time to go to the bus stop.”

“But Mom, I don’t want to go,” I said. “I don’t like the idea of going to a new country,” I responded sadly.

“Well, this is not an option!” Mom exclaimed. “This is official”

Here is where everything gets serious. We traveled for three days straight on a bus with 30 people from Michoacan, Mexico to the border. After we got to the border, we stayed in a hotel for a whole week. After that week, we took another bus from the border to Los Angeles.

“I can’t believe we’re in Los Angeles!” Mom said. “It’s been my dream since I was little.”

“I know! It’s crazy to be in the United States!” I said.

“I’m excited to go to school!” said my little brother.

From Los Angeles, we went to a place called Van Nuys. Finally from Van Nuys, we took a bus to Sunnyvale.

Next, I attended school as a 5th grader at Bishop Elementary School. It was very hard to adjust to a new culture and a new language. But what is good was that I had people in my class who spoke Spanish, so I learned a little more than what the teacher taught.

We had a weeklong field trip to Walden West, or Science Camp. The first day at Walden West, I was completely lost in every single aspect. We only had five minutes to take a shower and another five to get dressed and go to the cafeteria to eat lunch. After lunch, we would go hiking with a guy named Scooby. Once, because we spent so much time talking and taking pictures, we didn’t get back to camp until midnight as we spent the entire time hiking. The last day, we got to swim and we had a pizza party because everyone who worked there loved that year’s class. When we were in line to board the bus to go back to Bishop, everyone was crying because they had to say bye to friends they had made there. Once we got to school, we saw our parents waiting.

Finally, I graduated from Elementary School, and it was time to move on to Columbia Middle School. When I was in 6th grade, people used to bully me for my physical looks. But I got over it and I moved on to 7th grade. Everything got much better as time went by. After that, 8th grade was just around the corner. I passed 8th grade with good grades and four months ago, I graduated from middle school.

“I can’t believe we just graduated from middle school. It feels like yesterday when we were little 6th graders!” said my friend.
The conflict of learning English is part of my past. And my future is Fremont High School. Of course, leaving my family behind was one of the hardest things that I experienced, but as time went by, I felt better. I made friends that are like my family now. I have a good feeling that high school is going to be great!

Still, I remember one day during the week at the border, we decided to eat out. The next day on the news, we heard about a shooting at that very restaurant. A little baby died. Everything in Ciudad Juarez was very dangerous. There was a lot of shooting as well as people stealing other people’s property.

“Can I go out and play with my friend?” I asked.

“No” said my mom.

“Why not?” I asked.

“Because you might get kidnapped,” my Mom answered.

Looking back, this experience was a very sad, exciting, and unforgettable time in my life. I hope you enjoyed reading my story.
“Here you go. Keep it. This is the last one.”

“Why did you give me a candy, my dear grandpa?” I was still crying. That was the last night I saw my grandpa in the hospital. He was very, very sick. Until my last day in summer school, he left all of us and went to a different world - a beautiful, shiny world that we didn’t know. My grandpa was an amiable person because he liked to give candy to me whenever I went to his house. At that time, I just knew that candy represents behavior -- adults liked to give candy when a child can behave maturely, like me.
Two years later, I was willing to board an airplane with my mom and moved to the United States. I held the last candy tightly and said goodbye to my friends, uncles, and my grandma.

First, my aunt took me to a public middle school the next day in the United States. Everything was unfamiliar. I observed there were no tall buildings in the community and students were wearing their ordinary clothes to school. Only then did I realize I wasn’t in China anymore, and my grandpa wouldn’t give me any candy. We arrived at a low school building, and my aunt helped me wear a large scarf.

“Now, go to the school office first. It’s on the left side inside of this building. I need to park my car now. See you there,” my aunt said.

“Wait! I don’t know any English,” I sighed because my aunt just drove the car away. Students stared at me weirdly, while I walked straight to the main office.

“Hey, little girl, come in,” the office counselor said with passion.

“Hi, eh…. My name is...Xiaolin...” I was extremely nervous.

“I already know your pretty name. Where is your aunt?” she smiled.

“Yeah, I’m here. I’m Xiaolin’s aunt,” my aunt hurried in. They shook hands together and started to talk about my placement.

“In order to place Xiaolin at the correct level, she has to take a test right now,” she looked straight at me. However, I didn’t know what they were talking about. After a while, my aunt said goodbye to the counselor and told me to follow the counselor to a quiet classroom.

“Be strong. I believe you will pass the test, my dear,” my aunt waved at me.

“What? I have to take a test?!” I said to myself.

Second, I followed the counselor, and she handed me an English test. My heart was pounding whenever I wrote down a word. It was a placement test that determined what grade I’ll be in. However, I didn’t understand most of the test so I got a poor grade. The counselor lady decided to place me in sixth grade even though my age was already up to seventh grade. After school, I felt really bad and decided to stay in a dark corner. I didn’t want anybody to find me and take me home. People thought I was an “old” sixth grader in school. “Why are you in sixth grade?” most of the people who met me today kept asking this stupid question.

After I calmed down, I took out the last candy and started to look at it. It was a connection between my grandpa and me. Suddenly, I saw my grandpa’s face come out from the candy. “Xiaolin, don’t give up. Try this candy and it will give you courage to overcome all the difficulties,” he smiled. I started to taste this candy. It’s chocolate flavor, which is my favorite. I felt there were a hundred morsels of chocolate melting in-
side of my mouth - sweet, warm, and enjoyable. I got the answer! My grandpa gave candy to me because he wanted me to be happy, brave and to overcome all the difficulties whenever I encountered them. “Difficulties are not hard as long as you work hard. They are like candies and contain sweetness inside their body,” my grandpa’s smile faded. Then, he disappeared.

Finally, I went to the school parking lot and I saw my aunt standing beside her car. When she saw me, she began to cry. I ran to her side and held her tightly.

“Sorry, it’s my bad,” I said.

I couldn’t sleep that night and I started to think about all the things that happened that day. It is my first day in American school, but a lot happened. Even though I failed the English test, the candy warmed my heart. I missed my grandpa, my friends and everything in China. From then on, I realized happiness is the key to overcoming difficulties. I had to be strong and take care of myself. It was also important to treasure my family and everybody that was around me. Wind was blowing, like a whisperer, “shine like a candy.”
"Now, today is your first day at school. Do your best! " said my mom brightly. She tried to encourage me while we were driving to my new school. That day was the day when three weeks had passed since coming to America. Furthermore, it was my first day attending Hyde Middle School.

Through the window, I saw many students walking to school. Many of them were walking with friends, giggling, laughing, and talking to each other. Definitely, they seemed to be used to a day in an American school. As I saw those groups of students, I
felt something awkward inside me. This was my first day, so I thought the reason I had an uncomfortable feeling was because I was nervous about my new school. After my mom drove the car a few more blocks, I finally arrived at Hyde Middle School.

I opened the car door and said, "See you later, Mom!"

"Good luck."

My mother replied, smiling. I stood still on the gray road and watched my mother's car vanish. Now it was time for me to do everything by myself.

First, I headed straight to the main office. I needed to wait for my new schedule since they didn't give me one before. I was tense, wondering how I could make a good conversation without shivering or making mistakes. I wanted to walk as slowly as I could, wishing to go back to the time when I first came to America. I hesitated in front of the desk.

However, one of the teachers who I had seen before recognized me and said, "Oh! Are you the new student? You can wait there while I get your schedule."

So I had to wait a long time even after the bell rang. All the students seemed to have gone to class. The only sound left was the ticking noise of the clock and papers flipping. The silent room made me worry about everything related to my new school. I started to feel sick again. I worried whether I would experience the worst school day ever. I also worried about myself going to the wrong class. The blue carpet made me dizzy. I never thought that I would be this nervous. Few minutes later, I received my schedule.

Next, I had a short tour of the campus. Everything looked unfamiliar to me. The school had two big track fields where PE students were running their miles. There were many classrooms too. The school was so big that I forgot every location right after I went to my first period. I felt stressed.

My first period, which was Algebra, had ended well. With relief, I sighed. But as I noticed the students packing up, I was shocked because I didn’t have any idea that I had to move classes. In Korea, students just stayed in one classroom and the teachers came to teach each subjects. I stood still, terrified. I began to miss my middle school in Korea so badly. However, I was very lucky. My first period teacher noticed what was wrong, so she told me to follow another student who also had PE next period.

In PE class, I finally had a chance to make new friends. Their names were Neimy and Miyuki. They were very friendly and nice. They taught me about Hyde Middle School specifically and I learned a lot from them. Also, Neimy had an interest in Korean so I had a great time talking with them. Soon I noticed that the awkward feeling at the office came from the worries of making new friends. I thought it would be very
hard to make new friends in a new culture. So I was really pleased to have met good friends on the first day of school.

Finally, I began to enjoy other classes. Various subjects and electives were interesting and fun. Some of them even felt better than my own country. At lunch time, I wasn’t lonely because I ate with my new friends. I began to feel that I could get used to Hyde Middle School and have fun. Although I was worried, I had a great time when I first went to school in the United States.
I clearly remember that day was a Sunday morning. There was no sunlight anywhere, just like my heart. The weather was cold and cloudy, confusing those who expected a clear blue sky. And of course, it represented my confusion about my future.

My mom set an alarm clock, to wake me up at seven o’clock. Usually I still would be sleeping in my bed and drooling on my pillow at that time in the morning. However on that day, I got up to pack my things, had a quick breakfast, and prepared to get on my way to America.
On my way to the airport, I felt as if my entire life spent in my hometown in China flashed in front of my eyes. How crazy I was when I played with my friends; how angry I was when others teased me; how nervous I was when I made mistakes. Every event, whether good or bad, at that moment all became the greatest memories that I would probably never forget.

Usually it would take a long time to get to the airport, but on that day, time flew extremely fast. It was so fast that I felt like everything I was familiar with disappeared forever. I was nervous. What it will be like in the US? Will I make a lot of friends in the US? Could I participate in that society? There was so much unknown - and so much fear.

I whispered at my mom “Mom, are we gonna be fine in America?” “Of course my son. Of course we will be fine,” Mom answered with a shivering voice. Then I noticed that she was crying. I knew that she was as nervous as I was, but what can I say? This was the path that I had chosen myself. No time to regret. I can only go forward no matter how hard this path will be. There was no route of retreat.

By the time I arrived in America. Everything was brand new - new streets, new buildings and new people. It is a nice country. The air is fresh and the environment is lot better than in China. But the loneliness I felt was a big problem. I had no friends here in the first two weeks, and I was keeping in contact with my friends in China almost every day. My life wasn’t on the right track. But luckily, school began.

The first day of the school was probably the most nervous moment I had ever had so far in my life. All my concerns and my fears came together all at once. I was afraid that the students won’t treat me nicely. I was worried that I won’t be able to understand what others are saying.

I kept asking my mom, “What should I do at school?”

“Just be confident,” Mom said “Confidence is the most important thing in your life. We already have been through a lot these weeks. I’m sure you can make it at school.” She dabbed my hair and patted my shoulder softly to encourage me. It was as if she is trying to say “I’ll always be with you.”

Although my mother gave me lots of courage, I still found it difficult to find my voice in the first week. I was afraid to speak out and to make mistakes. Because I wasn’t talking much, I barely made friends in school. There were always crowds of students in the school, but I was always the individual - the one not part of any group. After two weeks, I finally couldn’t stand it, so I started talking. I started making mistakes. People laughed at me when I made mistakes or had trouble understanding, but I endured and kept telling myself I could do better. I started to make friends. I started
to hang out with others. After two months, I made lots of friends, and my life was on the right track. That was the time when I realized how important confidence is.

Even with many new friends, what really made me feel like I was involved in the school was a performance at school. That day was Culture Day at Monta Vista High School, and that was an opportunity for me to show off my singing skills. Back in China, my mom always told me that I would have many opportunities to demonstrate my talents. Here’s the chance. While I was performing, I thought about my journey to the USA so far. It felt this was the turning point. Every tear I had, every sadness I felt were worth it at that moment. When the performance was done, the audience started to applaud. At that moment, I believed I was truly a part of not only Monta Vista but also the United States.

Time passed. It’s September now. All the things that were unfamiliar to me are no longer strange. I know my journey has not yet ended; it’s just the beginning. Yet, I believe I can hold on and keep doing my best.
When I dance in the spotlight, I notice the audience watching me - only me. I feel neither nervous nor fearful; I can be myself and enjoy performing. This is my most favorite thing in life. Before I came to the United States, I believed that this was the only moment to express who I really am, and I never expected that dancing would help me when I face big obstacles off the stage.

I came to the United States on July 15, 2012. I had moved from place to place many times in Japan, but it was the first time moving abroad for me. I really liked
American culture, especially because as a young dancer who lived in Japan, I had an American teacher. Even though she spoke only English and I was not good at English, I was able to realize what a wonderful dancer she was and what she expected of me. She inspired me so much. Therefore, I thought I had come into a dream world, the United States of America, when I arrived here.

I went to the orientation for new students at Monta Vista High School during my summer vacation. I made some friends who spoke English very well even though I only spoke a little bit of English. Then, my high school life began.

Every day, I felt nervous about going to school because of my problem speaking English, but at the same time, I was also very excited. When I went to school, I was able to see my lovely friends and learned many new things such as math and biology in English. I thought that going to school was very fun. However, unfortunately, my speaking skills were horrible and made it difficult for me to enjoy high school life. When I was with my friends, I could not speak even a single word. One of my friends said, “Why don’t you talk to us?” I did not know why I did not either. However, after that, I realized that I was too shy and too afraid to speak. I am not a talkative and active person to begin with. In addition, I get nervous easily when I meet people who I really do not know. Because of those reasons, I felt anxiety and disappointment every time I met people in school. I was so shy that I could not talk to anybody in my class, and my participation points were only 40 percent at the time. I did not know how to improve my speaking skills, but I aspired to speak in English so badly.

Disappointed with my English skills, I worked hard to learn it. I grabbed the American DVDs on my shelf and watched many movies and dramas. Since I had many friends who go to international schools in Japan, they taught me English with Japanese. Their lessons were really precious and helpful for me... especially my best friend, Hana, who is half Italian and half Japanese. She taught me countless skills; she taught me how to write essays, read sentences, and communicate with friends.

One day, I noticed that I was able to understand what everyone was saying to me in English more clearly than before. I started to have confidence with my English. I was able to understand what people said, write essays, and read articles without much trouble. However, the only problem, speaking, did not improve no matter how much time passed. The reason was that I did not try to speak in English because of my shyness. When I tried to talk to people, I felt nervous and awkward. I just gave half a smile to them and did not respond with any words. I thought, “Why am I so nervous when I talk to people?” but I could not find the answer.
Then, I changed my way of thinking. I thought about the times when I did not feel nervous in front of many people. I already knew the answer: dancing on the stage.

At once, I searched for a place where I can take dance lessons and found the dance company I currently attend. I took a couple of ballet and jazz dance classes. There were hardwood floors, mirrors, speakers, and ballet bars in the studio. The sight was very familiar to me. I stood up in front of the mirror and took a really deep breath. I was ready for my close-up -- my dance performance in America.

Yet, I still did not talk to my classmates even though they talked to me. They said, “Are you a new student?” “I like your dancing!” I felt very happy to hear that and thought that I was born to dance. After that, I became very positive and active. I no longer felt nervous anymore when speaking to people in English; I had overcome my weakness finally.

I am a little shy still now, but I am trying to be positive and smile every day. My speaking ability is not perfect yet, but I want to improve it more. I have very good friends and appreciate them for helping me study English. Not only that, I am very grateful that I am a dancer. There are a large number of languages in the world, but I really believe that dancing can speak all of them. I have been changed for good because of dancing.
“Hurry or you’ll be late!” called my mother from the kitchen. “Today of all days you want to be on time.” If I had only known what that day would bring, I would have stayed in bed. It was my first day of school in the United States. I thought it would be like a school in my country, but soon I realized that I was wrong. Everything was totally different. August 22, 2011 would be stuck in my mind for the rest of my life.

It was a sunny morning, and I walked to school for the first time. I felt a tickle in my stomach—in other words, I was really nervous. I pondered how Homestead High
School would be. Growing up in El Salvador, my class was made up of only 80 people. In El Salvador I stayed in one classroom the entire day and there was no cultural diversity whatsoever. Little did I know, there would be no classes in my language at Homestead and the population was quadruple the class size of what I was used to.

I arrived at school that morning and began to realize that my perspective of American schools was entirely wrong—there were so many people that it was hard to walk, so much diversity, and English was the only language I could hear. The bell rang and I looked at the room number where I was to pick up my schedule. I gazed at the map of the school with confusion and puzzlement. It looked like a maze, and I was lost in it. I had no idea where to go. I started to walk around the school to see if I could find help and realized that I had a major problem; no one seemed to speak Spanish. I could not even say a word in English. I felt angry and confused. I was thinking, “When is this day going to be over?” Finally a teacher came up to me, and I showed him the room number that I needed to go to in order to receive my schedule. My hands were trembling. He told me a series of things and pointed to a building, but I still didn’t understand what he was referring to. I was even more frustrated than before. Then I met another teacher on the way and she asked me, “What is your name?”

I answered, “Not English.”

Then she asked again, “What language do you speak?”

I answered again, “Not English.” She could speak Spanish, but she was not sure if my language was Spanish, then she asked, “¿Hablas español?” It means “Do you speak Spanish?”

I was excited and replied, “Si,” which means yes. Finally! I found someone who spoke Spanish, and she showed me the way to the office. She explained to the people in the office that I couldn’t speak English. After that, I received my schedule. A person from the office showed me each of the rooms I had to go to before I went to my first period. I went through all my classes, and returned home so disappointed because I didn’t get anything from any of the classes I attended. When I arrived home, my mom asked, “How was your day?”

“Not so good,” I replied.

“Don’t worry, it happens only on the first day, especially when it is a new school,” she added.

Believing what my mom had told me, the next day came, and I went to my first class and it was the same. I didn’t understand a word in my first class. Then in my P.E class there was a problem. I went to look for the class in the gym, but there was no one there. Little did I know, the teacher had explained the day before that they would meet
on the field the next day. Feeling defeated, I sat down in the quad and waited for the bell to ring.

The day ended, I was so disappointed, dismal, and felt foolish. Nothing was like my old school. I didn’t even know what the words Freshmen, Sophomore, Juniors, and Seniors stood for. At home my mom asked again, “How was your day?”

I answered, “Really bad. I don’t want to be here. It is not what I expected. It is not working.”

Then she added, “You have to realize that you are not in our country any longer. You have to start accepting that many things are not the same as our home in El Salvador, and you have to get used to it.” Although I understood what she said, she did not have the viewpoint of what I was suffering. At the end of my first year I had the impression that English would be impossible to learn, and Ianguished over not progressing.

However, during summer I spent a lot of time watching English movies and the following school year. Without noticing, my English had improved a lot. My teachers were shocked and asked things like, “How did you do it? Your English is impressive.” This made me want to push myself and gave me the confidence to make me realize that I could do it. I began by being a tutee at the Academic Center and now in my third and last year of high school in America, I have become a tutor.

Mom was right, and I accepted what she told me. I had made what felt like the impossible, possible. It’s been hard to adapt to this country since my first day of school. I started a new life, learned English, and built friendships with people from different cultures. I learned that sometimes you have to start from zero. I will never forget my first day of school in the U.S. because it reminds me of how I started with my “Not English” and how I’ve been improving day-to-day.