

Change for the Better: I dare to dream in NYC

This essay was written by Nhi Tong and published by Youth Communication.

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Clammy sweat trickled down my temples. I would be late for class again. My trembling hands smelled like the metal combination lock. It was my tenth attempt to turn the dial clockwise, counterclockwise, and clockwise again, yet it wouldn't open.

In Vietnam, we didn't use locks like these. Even though the school store staff had shown me the instructions, I struggled to open it. The banging from the locker doors slamming around me made me feel more tense. Girls, chatting in small groups, were leaving the changing room. Tears oozed out of my eyes from frustration.

It had been a week since I first walked into this old giant building whose name, Forest Hills High School, I thought of as peculiar. When I translated the name "Forest Hills" into my language, it sounded like an unusual name for a school, especially as it wasn't near any forests or hills.

My name is Nhi, a foreign name. My appearance contrasted strikingly with the other girls who wore make-up, blow-dried their hair, and wore stylish clothes. I had a boyish look, favoring plain T-shirts and faded, colored jeans. I had long, black hair. Worse, I had a thick foreign accent. "What did you say?" people always replied to me.

In my English class, I squinted from the sunlight streaming through the window. The teacher's voice faded away in the hot September air. Pretending to scribble down notes, I looked at the blank page. The teacher's voice was low and he spoke too fast.

"Sorry, what does he want us to do?" I asked the girl sitting next to me.

She explained but I couldn't understand her after just hearing it once.

OUTGOING WHILE GARDENING

My parents immigrated to the United States wishing for a better education for my younger brother and me. However, neither of them adjusted well to American culture.

To relieve stress, my father complained incessantly about how he expected our new life to be difficult but he never imagined the reality would be this harsh. Neither of them spoke English fluently or had any friends here. My mom particularly missed her TV shows. Both had their own struggles; they couldn't be there to comfort me. I realized it was up to me to adjust to the U.S.

I had never been the most sociable kid, but I eventually realized that entering this high school in this new country was an opportunity for me to become more outgoing. So despite the language barrier and culture shock, I forced myself to get out of my comfort zone. I joined the Key Club, a youth volunteer program, and participated in building a community garden.

I remember my first Key Club event. I swallowed hard, gathering up the nerve to approach a new friend. "Well, what is there to be afraid of? She won't eat me," I told myself, walking toward an Asian girl who was absorbed in her phone.

"Hey, do you know when this event will end?" I asked, as an excuse to start the conversation.

"I am not sure. Around two, I think," she said.

"Thanks. By the way, what is your name? My name is Nhi."

"My name is Susanna. Is it your first time here? I have never seen you before."

"Yes, I just moved here!" I replied eagerly, feeling happy. I continued the conversation, feeling proud of myself that I'd taken this big step.

Soon, I wasn't the girl walking around school with no one to talk to. The hours I spent reading and writing in my journals and mingling with people also improved my English skills. "You just came here and your English is so good," people often told me. I had also decided to change my name to Michelle so I would fit in better. Even the combination lock that had frustrated me so much in the beginning became easy for me to open. I thought, "How did this little thing make me cry before?"

I MADE FRIENDS FAST

Six months later I was leaning against a wall between two bookshelves in Barnes & Noble. Around me, four of my friends cracked me up with their teasing jokes about how I was when I first moved here.

“You are so mean, Edward,” my friend, Susan, taunted.

“Yes he is. Can you believe he did not talk to me or respond to my Facebook friend request after we had been in the same class for a few months?” I said.

“I did not like you at that time because you asked too many questions!” Edward said.

I chuckled. To be honest, I did bombard him with many inquiries.

The following week, I remember how my ears turned red after my teacher applauded me in front of the class. “She moved here just six months ago and she understands what this quotation means!” he said after I gave him my interpretation. Everyone turned to look at me. My friend Angie who was sitting in front of me winked as if to say, “Good job, Michelle!”

I told people my real name when I began my senior year in September. It seemed that Nhi was not difficult to pronounce like I had assumed. “It sounds special,” they’d say.

I loved that each day at Forest Hills High School was an opportunity for me to meet a new lovely friend. In my old school in Hanoi City, we stayed with the same classmates from year to year so I didn’t get to meet that many new people. Here, interesting conversations, different stories, and precious knowledge were always lurking in this huge building, which thrilled me.

One year later I no longer feel like that isolated girl who couldn’t speak English clearly and didn’t know what was going on in class. I can talk to new people easily and I’m confident.

Moving to the United States feels like walking into a vast room with many doors labeled with lots of different choices and I am allowed to choose the one I think I’ll like most. After writing and communicating with others in a new language, I think I want to work in the media, reporting on world events. I will keep on defining myself but right now I’d like to become a broadcast journalist or a television producer and writer.

Coming to New York has changed me. I did not dare to dream before, but now I do. I’ve become a stronger and braver girl, while still nurturing my traditional values. I’ve rebounded with a stronger self-esteem and sense of purpose. And the lesson of these past two years will always remind me that a life without challenges is not worth living.