

Chapter 7

IMMIGRANTS

Real migration lets real people find better lives. In this chapter, twelve recent immigrants give you an idea of who they are and what they have come to find in the United States. Before you see their essays, I try to explain where my own ideas came from and how I came to believe that foreigners are people, too.

ESSAY 0

by **P. V.**
from the United States

On the farm where I grew up, we were too busy feeding the world to think much about foreigners or immigration. We knew that the hungry people were far away and sometimes saw pictures of them standing in long lines in Africa or Asia to receive our American grain. My family and I worked overtime to grow more grain to give to charity. While just a teenager, I saw the solution to both problems. Hungry people shouldn't be standing in long lines; they should be here helping us.

Only one other house could be seen from our house, and it belonged to a Korean woman and American man who met and married while he was in the army. Our lives didn't seem too crowded because of her, and on hot days she would bring a cold drink for us when we were working near their house. Their young children brightened the neighborhood.

In a college town, you see more foreigners and get more chances to think about life from

their viewpoints. Most students come for just a few years, but many stay. American students often complain about the foreign accents of their professors and teaching assistants. Because college is expensive, students want to hear clear lessons. If students learn about not only the usual lesson but also about other ideas, languages, and cultures through those foreign accents, then they can get several skills at once.

At the University of Illinois, the most advanced course I took was taught by a professor from Uruguay. The substitute teacher was from Sri Lanka. They both did a great job. Professors for some of my other college courses were from France, India, and Japan. Travel is not so necessary if the world comes to you. Also, I began to notice that foreigners often will talk about important topics that few Americans care about.

As a graduate student, I was surrounded by foreigners. They came at me from all directions, captured my attention, and left with it. From Africa came a woman who wanted to solve bigger problems than those found in America. One day she met me on the stairs and screamed "I hate all Americans!" Slowly, I began to agree with her. From India came a friend who could laugh and smile all day, watch M-TV all night, and then out-think all of the Americans in class. From Iraq, a volunteer who helped teach me computer programming. And from Germany, someone

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whose interests were closer to mine than any American I had met.

The graduate student offices at Iowa State were not segregated. Each office held about five people. In one office, the five students were from five different continents. In most offices, at least three continents were represented. My own office had mostly Americans, but also two Dutch students and one each from Germany, Yugoslavia, South Korea, and Canada during my 5 years.

We often traveled together to summer meetings, usually with two Asians, one African, and one or two Americans in my car. One year one of the South Americans went along to California and taught me how to swim during the trip. He got along okay with North Americans like me, but his best friend was North African. Together, we discovered that people are people. I'm trying to publish our bold, new idea.

Housing was also not segregated in the town of Ames, Iowa. The graduate dormitory was a mixture of everyone from everywhere. The only informal segregation I saw was when the foreign students gathered to watch the evening news, and the Americans didn't bother. After a semester in the dormitory, I rented a house for 2 years and an apartment for 3 years and shared the rent with roommates from Greece, Syria, Tunisia, Germany, the Netherlands, and the United States. Some were easier to live with than others, but I couldn't judge that ahead of time based on where they were born.

Some of the foreign students tried to stay and get work in the United States after earning their degrees, and a few were given permission. Most knew even before coming to study that they would have to leave. Ideally, jobs are where you find them. A student from Greece earned his Ph.D. in the office next to mine in Wisconsin, found a

nice job in Canada right away, and then a better job in Sweden two years later. In reality, jobs and people often are separated by law. Korean and Chinese friends asked about government jobs such as mine. As a good bureaucrat, I had to tell them, "We don't discriminate, but you can't get a permanent job here. You might get a temporary job if no Americans apply."

Many of the foreign couples that I knew had babies while visiting the United States and looked forward to some day when these American citizen children might bring them back here to stay.

The subject of citizenship and the right to work came up often whenever my single friends or I would date someone from a different nation. Falling in love and thinking about getting married are exciting. Much less fun are reading the government rule book and hearing your friends say that your date just wants to use you to get past the U.S. immigration service. My roommates from Germany and Tunisia and I each ended cross-national relationships in part because of immigration law.

A Florida taxi driver, originally from Spain, told me not to worry so much about American laws. He came here illegally and soon became legal. Getting into Ecuador, where his wife is from, or Colombia, or even Mexico, had been much more difficult.

Hatred, violence, crime, disease, all sorts of bad things might result when different cultures mix. My neighbors in Laurel, MD, were mixed - about 40% black, 40% white, 20% other - but were very peaceful. Across the street from my apartment was a small mall and my bank. Of the three bank tellers, one was from India. Chinese families ran the video rental and dry cleaning shops. Three of the five barbers at the barber shop were from Southeast Asia. My lawn was mowed by a

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Central American immigrant. The woman who cleaned my office was from West Africa. My doctor was from India. For 5 years, I saw only good things there.

The Chinese woman who rented videos was so nice that sometimes I stopped there just to talk. When I asked “Do you have kids?”, she tried hard to answer correctly. She said, “I have one kids. I have one kid. I have one children. I have one child.” That's just the number her government told her to have. By moving to Maryland, she improved her own life and also mine. Her video business provided longer hours, less cost, and more convenient service for me than if she had stayed in China. I need more neighbors like her.

Three years after I left Laurel, I heard news that a Hispanic immigrant there had been kicked to death by five teenagers. If we view noncitizens as having no right to be here, then maybe those teenagers were right to protect their turf. If we view all people as having equal rights, then we need to teach our teenagers and our border guards not to kick people.

The best way to learn that immigrants are people is to meet some of them and talk to them. Language can be a problem. Usually the foreigner does the hard part and learns a second or third language. The native's part is easy: just choose simpler words, go slower, and let the other person know which of their “words” you understand or don't understand. For an American, these skills may be much more useful than learning some other language. Most of my foreign friends had years of training in English before they arrived in the United States. They just needed to get some honest reaction to make sure that what they said made sense. Foreigners sometimes apply foreign rules to English words, and in some cases the resulting

sentence sounds smarter than official English. Then you can both learn something.

WRITERS

Another way to learn about immigrants and their feelings is to read what they have written. A sample of stories and letters by recent immigrants fills out the rest of this chapter. The Rockford (IL) Literacy Council asked its students to write such essays for practice and to show their progress. Then, tutors helped the students improve their English. Katie VanRaden, my mother, selected the writings, which provide a picture of the recent immigrants to her hometown of Rockford (which is near Chicago), IL. The writers are from China, Hong Kong, Laos, Mexico, South Yemen, Thailand, and Viet Nam.

ESSAY 1

by S. N.
from Viet Nam

MY STORY

This is my story in about first time I get to job. I went to looked the job. Me and my sister both going to Personnel AIR FORCE & ARMY EXCHANGE. We are went in to applicant a any job sale clerk, cashier, or backer ect... The boss there are hired me and my sister. We are so happy.

The both we went home, next day we are going to work. I am afraid. Because, I never worked for AMERICA befor. But I went to work about a week after that I'm not be afraid no more. I have a job sale clerk, my sister have job cashier. We're get pay every two weeks.

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ESSAY 2

by N. A.
from South Yemen
written in 1991

My Trip to America

When get pay we're give money to our mom. I have a big family five sister and five brother. I'm number four of family. Me and my sister was worked to-gether about six years to service ARMY. My sister she meet one office soldier. She get married and both went to United State. But she wrote letter to me every month, about two years after she went to United State. The American soldier some went back to the United State, still have very few soldier in to VIET-NAMES.

My sister told my and my daughter go to United State. I wrote the letter to my sister and send the paper document me and my daughter. She make paper going to United State. I get document form my sister. I went to Embassy SAIGON into VIET-NAMES. I am go get to Pass-Port. I still worked a few month, I was lay off helper my mom worker a market. End the 1972. We're living home fly to United State.

When me and my daughter both we when to air line my family was cried very much. I miss my family very much both we cried. We are stay to air line over night ate and sleep. When the air line stop to Chicago AIR FORCE. We went out to air line walking in customer check. I looking my sister, I don't see her was to many people. But my daughter saw her. I was surprice my daughter still remember her. When my sister living my daughter was six years old.

My sister went to Chicago pick us up. We were no coat, no jacket was snow out side. We're went to the car was very colder. She take us home, went we are get home a drive way was to much snow. I caried two suite case, I was feld down to snow.

In order to go to America I had to travel from S. Yemen to N. Yemen to stay for six months. The government did not want me to leave S. Yemen. I had to work very hard to make them let me go. After a long wait we were allowed to leave on a plane for America.

We got to America on December 27. It was cold and snowy. It was the first time I had seen snow. I wanted to walk to my new home right away not knowing that it was so far away. My husband said "Are you crazy? We have to go by car."

The next day my husband took me to Cherry Vale [mall]. We went to Bergners and I could not believe all the dresses. I could not believe they had so many in my size. I bought two right away.

Next we went to the market. I was surprised to see so much food and everything so clean and no long lines. I like all the grass and big trees.

I am very happy to be in America.

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ESSAY 3

**by M. P.
from Viet Nam
written in 1993**

Dear all friends,

I would like to tell you what caused my family to leave my country VIETNAM, and how my family came to United States.

My family lived in the city of VUNG TAU which is not too far from the city of SAIGON, the capitol of the Republic of VietNam. At this time, I was in the Republic Government Army. From January to April, 1975, most of the cities of South VietNam were occupied by soldiers from the Communist Government, who came from North VietNam. The last day of South VietNam, known as the Republic Government, was on April 30, 1975. On the same day, troops from the Communist Government converged in the streets of Saigon and the VietNam's war broke out between North and South and the War was ended.

My family and some of my friend's families left Vung Tau on a small boat that could hold about fifty people. We wanted to turn back to Saigon to look for my parents and relatives, but we didn't have enough time. While we were on the boat, we could see about fifty or more other small boat. My boat left the seashore of Vung Tau about ten miles, we saw a big navy ship of Taiwan and my boat came closely to the navy ship. The soldiers on the ship rescued us. We lived on the Taiwanese ship for two days and then we went directly to the Subic Base, belonging to the American Navy in the Philippines. We lived there for one day and then we were taken by airplane to the island of Guam. We lived in Guam only one week. After living in Guam for a short time, we were sent to a refugee camp provided by the American

Army in Little Rock, Arkansas. We lived in the refugee camp from May to August, 1975 and my family was soon sponsored by Holy Family Church in Rockford.

When my family came to Rockford on August 20, 1975, I was missing one of my children. At that time we left Vung Tau, my eldest daughter was staying with my mother-in-law in Saigon. Now she is here in the United States and in the last year at the Northern Illinois University. We started becoming acquainted with our new life. It was so difficult at first because we didn't know how to speak English. Now our life is fine and we appreciate the American custom. All members of my family are American citizens.

We are happy with our new life, but we will never forget our country where we grew up. Someday we hope to return to our country to visit our relatives and our old friends.

God bless you all.

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ESSAY 4

by M. D.
From Viet Nam

My Three Best Friends

My three best friends are Dung, Phong, and Hai. We met when I was seventeen years old. We have been friends for thirteen years. Now Hai and I are thirty, and Dung and Phong are twenty-eight.

All of us came from Saigon, Vietnam, but now all of us live in the United States. I live in Rockford, Illinois. Hai lives in San Diego, California. Dung lives in Sioux City, Iowa. Phong lives in San Jose, California.

I met Dung in a coffee shop in Saigon. We liked to drive around in my motorcycle. He fixed typewriters. He left Saigon in 1983. He walked from Vietnam through Cambodia to Bangkok, Thailand. He stayed at a refugee camp in Thailand for five years. Then in 1988 he went for six months to the Philippines at another refugee camp where he learned English.

He came to the United States in 1989 and lived in Chicago first and then moved to Sioux City. He works in a meat plant. He got married in Chicago and has one child. Four weeks after I came to the United States in January, 1992, I met Dung in a Vietnamese grocery store in Chicago. We were happy to see each other again. Since he has moved to Sioux City, we phone each other. This summer, he and his family will visit me in Rockford. I will be happy to see him.

Dung introduced me to Phong. Phong lived next door to Dung in Vietnam. He sold cars and motorcycles. He learned a lot of English in Vietnam. He went to school for four years. In February of 1991, he went to the Philippines for six months. He helped translate Vietnamese into English.

He arrived in the United States in April or August of 1991 and went to San Jose, California. His brother got him a job at the casino. He learned how to be a card dealer. He was so good that he is now boss over the other card dealers. He married just this November. He wants me to move to San Jose and work in the casino. I might go to Vietnam with him next year when he returns to visit his parents.

Phong and Dung introduced me to Hai. In Vietnam he made clothes. He studied English for one and one half years. He arrived in the United States three months after me. He now lives with his sister in San Diego, California. He goes to college. He hopes to be a salesman. He works part-time delivering newspapers. Phong and I may visit Hai next year before we go to Vietnam.

I hope to be friends with Dung, Phong, and Hai for the rest of my life. We have had many good times together.

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ESSAY 5

by anonymous
from Thailand

Why I came to U.S.A

We have 6 members in our family. My parents have four children, there are two boys and two girls, and I'm the second child. Currently, my father is a Thai soldier in Thailand, and my mother is a housewife. When I was in Thailand, I studied at the University of Thailand. Fortunately after several years in school, I graduated with a degree in Physical Education. Most of the time in Thailand I love playing sports. Especially volleyball because I'm good at it. In Thailand, I worked at hotel for 5 years. My job was to contact and help people. Including foreigners who were in Thailand for vacations. The big reason why I came to United States is to improve my English. So I could help many many people back in Thailand. Besides that, English is very crucial for me. Because today wherever I go, I have to face society by using English to communicate with people.

I decided to come to Rockford because I have cousins and friends here. They gave me an advice about the good quality of Rockford College. They also sent me I-20 form in order to apply for student visa. Back in Thailand before I came to United States. First, I went to the U.S embassy in Bangkok to interview to approve for my visa to come to United States. Fortunately one week later after my interview, I was approved to come to United States. And then I flew from Thailand directly to O'hare airport at Chicago. After that I studied at Rockford College for 3 semesters. I took English language course and I also played volleyball for school. Recently, I have information from my friend about Rockford Literacy Council which I would like

to sign up for tutoring. Now I'm so appreciate and I also enjoy studying with my tutor.

ESSAY 6

by T. K.
from Laos

I was born in Laos Savanaket. I studied at school than I go to high school 4 years more. That all twelve years for studied.

I finished school 1980. I still with my family 7 / 9 / 1981. I came to Thailand, with friends and by boat.

I lived in Napho Camp, about five years. And I got two daughters. In 1986 I arrived in Philippine camp. I lived there 6 months to studied English.

After that I arrived in Washington state. It first State of America my family stayed in 6 hr or 7 hr. Next second state is Minnesota. I lived in Minneapolis airport five mn.

Then I get in next airplane (small). In plane have ten people, I flew to Waterloo about forty-five mn (45').

When airplane stop, my family get out the door and saw two or three people, they bring big camera took my family picture.

My friends and cousins their wait in side. I have American, Lao friends, and they talk about my family.

The Lutheran Church my sponsor. They are very nice than my family love them very much. After two days I saw my news at the TV and newspaper. I lived Waterloo, IA two years ago.

And I moved to IL Rockford.

Thank you for reading.

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ESSAY 7

by J.
from China
written in 1991

Dear Hu giang:

How are you? I hope you are very well!

Time runs very fast. My husband and I have been in America more than one year.

America is a beautiful country. I like the people here and we are happy here.

The United States has fifty states.

My second brother and little sister live in the California. My oldest sister lives in Illinois. My address is [] Belvidere, IL.

One years ago my husband and I began to learn sign language. Some words of sign are the same as Chinese signs. Now we can do a little sign language. I am happy. I have another teacher, her name is Mrs. [R. E.]. She lives in Rockford. Twice a week she comes by her car to the Belvidere library to teach me English. She is a very good teacher. I like her very much.

We plan to move to Madison, Wisconsin to be near my daughter.

We hope our daughter in Madison will be able to find a job for us.

Your friend
J.

ESSAY 8

by Y. L.
from Hong Kong

American was a very strange place to me when I moved here. Something was different from Hong Kong and I'm not very good in speaking English either. I lived in Chicago for a while but after a year or so I moved to Rockford because I couldn't find a good work there. Some said I don't have a high school diploma in American, other just made up reasons and reasons.

I was little bit luckier when I moved to Rockford. I started to make some friends and with their helps, I had moved twice trying to find a better school for my children in Rockford. Now they go to a good school and my wife with me have a good job too.

In American some good and some were bad. Especially in math. I think the math standard level is way too low. It is much lower than many countries. Further, according to a twelve nation survey done by the U.S. Department of Education, Americans were at the back of the class in calculating ability. That is only one reason, "American education is too free wheeling."

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ESSAY 9

by R.A.
From Mexico

My Trip to the US

In March, 1990, I came to United States from Mexico. I was 23 years old and did not speak English. This was my first big problem because when I went to the store, the salesman would ask if he could help me. All I could do was point to things I wanted or take someone with me. A year later I got English classes.

When I first came, I felt like a rich man, because in Mexico I didn't go to Sears and malls as they were more expensive. I thought all the people were rich. I saw the people with cars, good clothes and telephones. I was surprised that it was easier to get work in the United States. In Mexico, I could get a job, but they don't pay enough money to live. Hot water in the house is very nice. The food is better, because I can get more kinds of food easier. I like to eat in MacDonal'd's!

The American people were helpful and friendly. They tried to help me understand how to do things and speak English. One day when we were going to work, we had a tire blowout and we went to a house. The woman let us in to use the phone and then in a few minutes she came out with a rifle and told us to get out of the house or she would shoot us. We left and got in the van and went down the road with the tire flopping. We had to walk to work when the tire fell off.

Now I study English with a tutor and go the classes. I want to understand English and have people understand me. I want to have a good job, home and family some day. In the future, I want to go to school and get a GED and then I will think about the future. I know now that all the people are not rich, but that

they have a lot of things and want to be happy.

ESSAY 10

by L. M.
from Mexico

My name is [L. M.] and I been here in U.S. for almost nine years. I still remember when I came. I was so confused because all the houses and streets were the same to me and one thing the I noticed was the Rockford is so peacefull. Why am I saying this? Because I came from Mexico City and I don't like big cities anymore that's why I prefer to stay here with my daughter Laura. I really like it here.

ESSAY 11

by F. L.
from Mexico

On July 10, 1981 I came from Mexico to Rockford, IL., to visit my brother on my vacation. I liked Rockford for the life it had to offer.

The jobs are different in that they require more skill. I'm glad I'm learning English as a second language.

The thing I do not like living in the United States is I am far away from home and I miss my family.

My ambition is to study for citizenship. I know that I will be happy here and to became a citizen.

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ESSAY 12

by P. P.
from Thailand
written in 1992

I was born in Chiangmai, north in Thailand. When I was about 12 years old my Dad died. I stopped going to school at age 13. I worked every day on a farm. The farm people paid me to work.

I was poor when I was a child. I didn't have time to play with other children. I had to support my mom. I grew up without love. I was always busy working for a living. Work on the farm is hard work. I was tired of it. When I turned 18, my cousin asked me to come work for her. I say yes. I came to live with with her for 4 years.

Then the telegram came to my cousin's house. The telegram said my mom had passed away. It takes 4-5 days for a telegram to come to my cousin's house. By that time my uncle had burned my mom's body. They don't keep dead body that long. In Thailand the weather is warm all year around. I feel so sad I don't get to say goodbye to my mom at all. I really miss my mother.

My story has a happy ending. I met my husband when he was a GI. He asked me to marry him. At first I was scared because I only know him for 6 months, and I didn't speak English. I came with him to America in 1976. I made the right choice to come with him because I didn't have anybody back home.

I have been in the United States for 16 years now. I have two daughters. Their names are Sarah and Amanda. Sarah is 11 years old and Amanda is 9 years old. I am so lucky that I have a good husband. He loves me.

ESSAY 13

by S. C.
from Laos

I lived in Lao in 1979. I went to Thailand to the refugee camp. 5 years I stayed with my husband and two daughters there. My husband died in the camp. In 1985 we went to the Philippines. after six months there, we flew to America.

We came to my sister in Rockford, IL. It was cold and very different. My daughters like the school here. I learned to drive here. Sometimes I am scared, there are so many cars. I like to go to school and learn English.

I like to write a letter to my mother-in-law in Lao. I plan to go back and visit someday.

REACTION

Some of the people who read these essays will conclude from the imperfect English and strange experiences that the writers don't deserve to be Americans. Others will read the essays and feel good that these writers have found better lives.

When I read the essays, I sense that the writers were adults, even if their English writing is not yet perfect. If they or other adults want to move to Rockford, we should let them. People are people, and all of us should be free to move.