

Home Away From Home

“Mom, I got into UD!” I still remember how excited I was to be the first one in my family to have the opportunity to study outside of my home country, Panama, and also be the first one to pursue a degree in engineering. I was so excited that I did a countdown every single day leading up to move-in day at UD. I kept practicing my English with people around me including my mom, which really irritated her considering she doesn’t speak English, and would constantly watch YouTube videos titled “A Day In The Life of a College Student.” Once I moved in, I remember walking up to the green, and feeling a sense of fulfillment. I felt invincible. However, as a couple of weeks went by, it became very difficult to be far from my family, friends, food, and more while at the same time navigating a different country, culture, and a rigorous curriculum.

I knew that an engineering curriculum was going to be hard, but I had no idea how much harder it was going to be along with living in a new country and being a minority. On my very first midterm in college, which was for Calculus I (MATH241), I got a 58%. For context, I had never gotten a bad grade in school – I graduated as salutatorian of my class. I was devastated. The worst part was, I saw my grade while eating at Caesar Rodney, and without even noticing tears were rolling down my face. It was humiliating. I kept thinking “how can I be a successful engineer if I can’t even pass a calculus exam?”, “maybe I should leave, I don’t know if I can do this...” On top of that, I was struggling to make friends, which is something that I had never struggled with, so I felt like a complete loser. I felt that it was hard to connect with others because my day-to-day experiences and likings in music, food, etc. were so different than the typical American. I even had an awkward interaction while I was being introduced to someone because I leaned in for a kiss on the cheek (which is normal in my country, and I had, of course,

forgotten that it wasn't here) and she seemed so uncomfortable that she just walked away. I kept thinking that maybe I wasn't ready to be in another country, and that I should just give up. But then I remembered that I wasn't getting this degree just for me, but to make my family proud and all the Latina women in STEM out there. I knew I was capable and that I just had to keep pushing.

I decided to come up with a plan to improve my grade and social life. I got a planner and started to plan my days to the minute to make sure I was using my time wisely. I planned not only when I was going to do my homework and at what times, but also when I was going to eat, have leisure time, etc. I also planned weekly goals on how to make more friends, which included bullet points such as "you will talk to someone at the dining hall, and you will not be scared!" and "talk to people in class – ask for their snapchat (I think this is the social media platform Americans prefer to use?)" Looking back, it was definitely a little out there (and embarrassing) to plan my days like this, but it paid off. I became more social, and surely enough, I started to get to know others and make friends quickly. I was able to pick up on slang and what clothes girls preferred to wear, which made it easier to interact with others without looking like an outsider. Also, during an international coffee hour, I was able to meet a group of students from Latin America that are still my friends 3 years later, which was very helpful because they basically became my support group.

I also made it my goal to teach others about my country. Panama is a very small, yet beautiful country full of diversity and beautiful beaches. I knew I wanted to make sure that I planted a seed on everyone's head about Panama's existence and its beauty. Once I had enough trust with friends, I will tell them about all of my favorite experiences in my country, and typical cultural differences between Panama and the US so they could have a better understanding of my

experience as an international student. It was exciting to see them eager to learn more about my country. It truly felt like an honor to represent my country and share it with others at UD.

Fast-forward three years and I am now a senior. I have passed every single one of my classes and maintained a good GPA. I have had two internships, have been able to make meaningful connections with both my professors and friends, and have truly enjoyed being at UD, all while being in a pandemic for the last year. I can finally say that UD feels like home. I had to give up a lot, but I was also able to gain so much from it. I am now more confident, strong, smart, and I know that my future will be bright thanks to UD. My freshman year-self is extremely proud of how far I've come, and I am sure this is only the beginning of the many more goals I will accomplish. I am saddened that my journey at UD will be over this year, but I know I plan on coming back for events such as Alumni weekend, and for Roots (the best!), Ali Baba, and El Diablo on Main Street, obviously! I now look forward to not only representing my country, but also UD. I will forever be a Blue Hen in my heart.