

## **Crossing Comfort Zones: A Journey of Global Friendship**

When I first arrived in the United States as an international student, I anticipated certain challenges—adjusting to a new culture, navigating an unfamiliar academic environment, and settling into a new way of life. From stories I'd heard, many international students often feel isolated, facing loneliness and homesickness in a foreign country. However, my experience turned out to be quite different. Unlike the struggles faced by many international students, I was fortunate to start my journey with two other girls from Pakistan who not only shared my background but were also from the same city. This connection made my transition smoother, filling it with support and familiarity from the very beginning.

Even before we left Pakistan, we had arranged to lease an apartment together in the U.S., which minimized one of the biggest challenges for new international students. Traveling together, navigating airports, and arriving at our new home as a unit gave me a sense of comfort I hadn't expected. It was as though we had brought a piece of Pakistan with us, carrying it to a new part of the world. Our transition was further eased by the kindness of the Pakistani community we encountered. Families and students alike reached out to us, offering everything from transportation to groceries and household essentials like kitchen utensils and furniture. The challenges I had expected—finding housing, securing basic necessities, and building a support network—were quickly resolved through this generosity, making the transition much smoother than I had anticipated.

In addition to this initial support, I found a close-knit community of Pakistani students who had also arrived that year. Together, we built a “home away from home,” gathering for study sessions, sharing meals, and celebrating cultural holidays. This community became my foundation, providing comfort and a sense of belonging. But as time passed, I realized that almost all my

interactions and friendships were exclusively within this group. I had unconsciously recreated my social environment from Pakistan, surrounding myself with people who shared my language, culture, and background. While this was familiar and comforting, I began to sense that something was missing.

Living in the United States, a country celebrated for its diversity, presented a unique opportunity to learn from a variety of cultures and perspectives. Limiting myself to interactions only within my Pakistani community felt like a missed opportunity. Here I was, in a cultural melting pot, yet I remained within my comfort zone. This realization was both eye-opening and intimidating, as I had no idea how to break out of my social bubble or where to start.

One of my biggest challenges was initiating conversations with people from other backgrounds. With fellow Pakistanis, conversation flowed naturally; we shared a language, cultural references, and mutual understanding. However, with students from different nationalities, I often found myself unsure of what to say or how to approach them. This hesitancy made me linger on the sidelines at events, uncertain of how to start a conversation. It was at this point that my passion for food became an unexpected bridge to new connections.

Growing up, I had always been passionate about exploring different cuisines, sparked by shows like Anthony Bourdain: No Reservations and MasterChef USA. Though I had limited opportunities to experience international cuisine in Pakistan, I appreciated the stories and cultural connections food could create. When I realized my interest in food could serve as an icebreaker, it changed everything. Instead of struggling with small talk, I began using food to connect. I would start conversations by asking about someone's favorite dish or discussing a cuisine I'd recently tried or wanted to learn more about. Food became my bridge to understanding and connecting with people from different backgrounds.

At events like the International Coffee Hour, I began meeting students from Turkey, Iran, Bangladesh, Saudi Arabia, Greece, Mexico, and Korea. Our conversations often started with talks of favorite dishes, family recipes, and stories about foods that reminded us of home. Each exchange deepened my understanding of the people I met, and food quickly became a universal language that bridged our differences. What started as casual chats about dishes evolved into discussions of cultural traditions, childhood memories, and shared values. Food not only helped me make connections but also gave me a new appreciation for the commonalities across cultures.

Over time, these cultural exchanges not only broadened my perspective but also built my confidence. I found myself attending events hosted by different cultural organizations, immersing myself in new experiences, and even hosting dinners to share Pakistani cuisine with my newfound friends. Preparing dishes like biryani and kebabs allowed me to share my culture, and each gathering became an opportunity to introduce friends to the flavors and stories of Pakistan. Watching them enjoy the Pakistani cuisine and hearing their curiosity about my culture filled me with a sense of pride and belonging that transcended borders.

Reflecting on this journey, I realize that stepping out of my comfort zone transformed my experience as an international student. What began as a simple curiosity about food became a powerful tool for connection, bridging cultural gaps and fostering a sense of community. Through these culinary experiences, I have come to see food as more than just a meal; it's a means of building friendships, sharing heritage, and creating lasting memories. The friendships I've built and the cultural exchanges I've experienced have been as transformative as my academic journey itself.

My advice to newly arrived international students, especially those fortunate enough to have a strong community from their home country on campus, is not to limit themselves to this familiar

circle. While it may feel comforting, staying only within that community can prevent you from experiencing the unique diversity around you. Stepping out of your comfort zone may be intimidating at first, but it opens doors to friendships and perspectives that can transform your journey. Embrace the chance to meet people from different backgrounds, try new things, and learn about cultures from around the world. These interactions will not only enrich your university experience but also foster a deeper sense of belonging in this diverse world.