

What's Your Name?

Some people call it overthinking and others consider it unnecessary banter, but I see it as pure love towards the Universe to want to know the meanings of things. The theories jotted in my Notes app and the wordplay in the music I listen to make up an important part of who I am. This trait, I believe, is highly influenced by my culture in India.

Before a baby receives a name in my country, the potential name goes through a rigorous process to be verified by wise elders and relatives. Your legacy, your personality, and your life's plan are written in these few letters. 'What's your name?' is a question I thoroughly comprehended as I compared my friends' lifestyles to their names, a common theme in our community. Some were from separate languages, others were spelled strangely, and by some slip of a pen on my birth certificate, I ended up with both - Soffie, the Greek word for wisdom. Foreign names are uncommon in India, so it took plenty of slow pronouncing for my community to understand it. With time, I formed an identity greatly attached to my name and acknowledged by my people. Before I moved miles away from home, my name represented my extroverted demeanor and ability to inspire, synonymous with exuberance and, of course, wisdom.

Moving to the U.S.A. with excitement and general knowledge did not save me from the culture shocks I would face. At first, I was awed by smooth, silent roads with fully functioning traffic lights and no cows causing roadblocks. The people seemed joyous yet busy, and the stores contained infinite, unfamiliar brand names. At the University of Delaware, I appreciated how everything was so accessible - from mental health facilities to recreation and student organizations. I met my first friends at the International Student Orientation and utilized everything provided to me, spending my free time at the Esports Arena or exploring campus. I had so much to digest in little time before the semester began,

but clinging to my sense of self protected me. Halfway through, however, things slowly but surely began to turn with the more conversations I had.

The most repetitive comment I received complimented my English fluency, which I didn't know was unexpected for an Indian. People randomly exclaiming their love for butter chicken and naan made me wish I tried it more, as neither come from South India - where I reside. I also felt ashamed eating anything with my hands. People treated me differently when they heard my accent, as if my attempt to converse needed additional support. I needed to know about last night's game or risked getting excluded from conversations.

In an attempt to find myself here, I realized my name now represented spices, festivals, poverty, and a country that needed saving. I desperately tried to befriend people who assumed they knew me without *knowing me*, leaving me disconnected from the new cultures I was surrounded by, including my own. So many faces and so many names, yet no one wanted to know mine.

And just like that, I forgot what my name meant.

Looking back, I see that I entered America with the mindset that we were different, barely speaking up about my views. People had kindly used their assumptions to make me feel at home because they believed they could not ask questions, fearing they would offend or exclude me. I felt the same way about America, assuming they did not want to understand me likewise.

It took another semester to realize how much I was wanted in the UD community and how I needed it back. All the times I sat in silence had pushed me to see how we truly are the same people on the inside who simply assumed that we weren't. Assumptions can make or break relationships, and we can't rely solely on word of mouth to understand an entire community.

There is potential in us all to learn, no matter how far apart we are in distance. People wanted to hear my story, but I had to be a wise example first.

And that's when I remembered what my name meant.

I know I am different, but I am still just like you, and if you can know my name, then you can know my story. Thereafter, some unforgettable memories include me and my friends laughing at how differently we spoke and looked at things, alongside how our cultures impacted our viewpoints. Our similarities bring us just as close as our differences do.

So please, friend, ask the questions. Wear the cultural outfit. Try to speak the language. Put aside your assumptions and remember that kindness is not silence. You will never know the meaning until you ask, so ask with love, and I ensure you will value what you hear and the excitement you see on people's faces when they notice your curiosity.

As my sophomore year unfolds, I am proud to say I have never felt more welcome here. I surprise others with my knowledge of American tradition and attempt to teach my friends Telugu, my language. I explore many UD events with friends and knead my cultural experiences into class discussions. Now I see how people become more human when they recognize they are not bound by assumptions. True diversity is not solely in accepting culture but in learning about it. I have grown as a student and a person with my interactions, and I look forward to making many more memories here. And yes, I still ask my friends what their names mean.

I no longer attach my definitions to my assumptions. I am Soffie, a proud Blue Hen, a bold Indian who can bring a smile to a face and a window to a mind. I am a fighter, a survivor of stories only I can tell - and I hope to, throughout all my years at UD, my new home. That is my name.

So, what's your name?