Wendy Emali

Home Away from Home

Being 18, I would say that I have ‘lived’ my entire life in America – well, technically – I mean, a huge deal of what I watched on TV, sang or danced to, listened to on radio, in church and in class was basically ‘made in America’. As such, wouldn’t it be safe to assume that moving to America won’t require such great adjustment? That being physically there won’t be a totally new experience? That I would just fit right in, because nothing would be totally new and foreign, right? Well, definitely not! I learnt, and I am still learning through the hard way that it is one thing to live “American” outside America and another to be in America. My first experience in the Boeing 777 that brought me here was a sign of things to come. The huge aircraft seemed to mock me as it depicted no sympathy towards me, and as I sat there with my fears, worries, stress and doubt, its enormous engines just buzzed away as life went on. Leaving Kenya for America was my dream, and it was coming true. I had wanted to be free - live away from home – and I refused to think about the challenges that came with it. Well, at one point in time, reality was bound to set in, and it did pretty fast. The challenge of being far away from home and thousands of miles away from those I hold dear has forced me to speedily adjust. I am taking up this new life in stride, and I must state that I face something new every single day. Two months down the line, I am living by what Rosanne Cash once quoted- “the Key to change…is to let go of fear.”

“This must be a hard transition for you right?” a statement I heard several times that always made me secretly say “you think!” My already overwhelmed brain functioned slower every time I realized how fast life was in the US, not to mention MSU. I would always think “Left” until I stood on the wrong side of the road, only to end up at Meijer and not the originally planned Wharton Centre screaming to myself “Wendy, they drive on the right side of the road!” Not only did I stand on the wrong side of the road, I looked for oncoming cars on the wrong side; on one incident a driver loudly honked at me, something that made my heart beat faster than how it beats during my 50 minute aerobics class! I was ignorant of the fact that I was in a place where communication methods changed. I was no longer in a Kenya where If I gave a person my number I would tell them “Flash me so I can get yours”; only to realize the word ‘flash’ meant something inappropriate, and not ‘call back’ as it was in Kenya! I was so fond of what is known as ‘jay walking’ in my country, not knowing that one had to push a button to cross the road. I would now have to stop the habit of whistling in order to tell the bus driver that I need to alight. Instead I now pull a yellow string that I thought was present just to make the CATA bus look ‘pretty’! Now that I look back, I am glad I can look at these experiences, and laugh as I joyfully share them with my friends and family.
However, not all my experiences were unfortunate; I have to say that the warmth of OISS staff and the humility shown towards me when I asked for directions gave me a sense of comfort. The convenience of life made me have benefits I never thought I would have. For the first time in my life, I got to own a personal debit card, something that was rather restrictive in my country. Moreover, I would walk for a few meters and already spot a restaurant, with a large variety of foods, or if I was too tired, I would just order and the food would arrive in a jiffy. I am able to keep in touch with my spiritual side by attending Bible study just down the hall, and get acquainted with friends who are warm and pleasant at heart, and we can comfortably relate to each other despite our cultural and racial differences. I got the chance to involve myself in basketball and soccer, my favorite pastime and God-given talent which enabled me to make new friends and keep my health in a tip-top condition. The basketball players here wow, they would beat the Kenyan national team, 100 to I won’t say…I had the chance to be interviewed by the state news and appear on the front page; an experience which brought joy to my family and friends.

Indeed my moments brought different moods but they also created a sense of individual growth. I often quote my High School Chaplain when he once told me, “If God puts you in a situation (in this case MSU) then it’s his responsibility to take care of you.” It is true that we pay a lot to be here. The quantity can highly reflect the quality provided; the help that OISS provided in informing us on getting SSN’s, drivers licenses, OPT’s and CPT’s alongside numerous other terms that I am yet to be familiar with, the convenience that the Federal Credit Union offer, the variety of food Brody cafeteria serve and many other things that I would spend hours giving laudatory talks about, are epitomes of the level of interest and care shown by MSU and everyone affiliated with the University.

Although there are helping hands, I’m yet to adjust to the manner that we seek help around here. I admit that I’m spoilt as back home, people around would always lend a hand when one is carrying items around. I struggled to move my belongings all alone from the 2nd to the 4th floor when I had to move rooms as I wasn’t sure of how to ask for help!

My hair is not as kempt as it was back in Kenya. I shall not take for granted the sisters, neighbors, friends, cousins and house helps that were waxing my locks as we chatted away the evening. I was terribly shocked when I learnt that it costs $80 to twist my locks, and yet this was something that we did to each other for leisure, with the only cost being a cup of tea for each one of us. I am glad that I have adjusted to doing my own hair, mostly out of necessity and cost-cutting, in the interest of not being viewed as an untidy person. I still do it, one lock at a time and a maximum of 10 locks per day before my poor hands give up and wait to continue….will I ever finish? I didn’t know I had so much hair!
As we enter winter, I think about how Kenyans would freeze if they were to experience the seasonal changes. I now understand the four seasons, coming from a country where my jeans go throughout the year without many additional accessories such as gloves— I only saw them when Queen Elizabeth would wave her hand, not knowing that I would on one 8 degree Celsius day own a pair. I thought hooded clothes were fashion, now I know that it is a necessity to cover one’s ears. I am now forced to possess more than one pair of shoes, as while in Kenya, I would wear the same shoes from January to December, and only change them when they wore out!

In closing, I am aware that the past two months are only a tip of the iceberg. I am yet to experience more desirable and unpleasant moments. However, I am glad that I was willing to step out of that comfortable queen size bed (I do miss it) back home, eager to eat vegetables that are raw (Salad is not typical in Kenya) and prepared to adjust to the lifestyles which are evidently different from my own. In Africa, not a lot of women get academic attention and by being here, MSU is definitely advancing my knowledge and daily, transforming my life.