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SPARTANS WILL BELONG: FINDING MY PLACE AT MSU
1st Place

All That Worry for Nothing
Samar Shetty | INDIA

2nd Place

Full Circle: Becoming a Spartan
Benjamin Eshiwani | KENYA

3rd Place

Who’s Gonna Follow Their Miracle? Spatans Will.
Kyriaki Gkoudina | GREECE

The presence of international students at MSU provides us with extraordinary opportunities to learn about other cultures. MSU is deeply committed to building international understanding through education and is proud to host students from all over the world.

The goal of the International Student Essay Contest is to build greater crosscultural understanding and to learn from the experiences of international students. Living outside one’s own culture can trigger a complex range of feelings that lead to powerful insights. This contest is an opportunity for international students to reflect on their experiences and share their stories as international students at Michigan State University.
Finally, after nearly 3 months of waiting, it arrived. On a late November morning, I looked out of my window and saw it falling from the sky. I immediately rushed downstairs and just stood still outside, taking it all in. Realizing that I was actually experiencing it and not just witnessing it on TV was a surreal moment.

When people would hear that I’m from Dubai, almost always the very first question I would be asked is if I missed the warm weather back there and how I was coping with Michigan’s harsh winters. Ironically though, the harsh winter was one of the biggest factors that convinced me to choose MSU. Living in Dubai is like being in a sauna 24/7. Even when I would head to India during the holidays where I was born and my relatives still live, I’d only experience really arid, humid climate. It was almost suffocating being surrounded by this constant heat. Moreover, I had never seen snow and so when I felt chilly for the first time stepping outside on that late November morning, it wasn’t just the weather but something else that sunk in at last: I wasn’t home anymore.

Prior to my arrival at MSU, I was definitely anxious but I wasn’t dreading my arrival. I felt my exposure to American media and pop culture gave me a pretty good idea of what to expect. Movies and TV shows have provided enough information for me to get by, I would say to myself. However, once I got to the US, I realized it was the little everyday things that I would struggle with. I had no issues communicating with people, or getting around the place and figuring things out. But as time passed, I realized I had to adapt my vocabulary to suit the culture I was amidst.

Numerous times, I would refer to something and just draw blank stares from the person I was talking to, like they had never heard such a word uttered before in their life. I went to a restaurant and asked for a takeaway which got me 10 seconds of silence from the cashier, who then asked me if I meant an order to go. I realized a lift is an elevator here, biscuits are cookies, and wardrobes are closets. With these new realizations dawning on me every day, my initial confidence was replaced by a growing sense of insecurity.

In any conversation, I would hesitate to mention something if I wasn’t sure about the American term for it. Before I would speak to someone on the phone about an issue or step up to a counter to order something. I would google what I wanted to talk about to ensure I was using the right term. I would constantly get paranoid about someone being dumbfounded by what I said and greeting me with those awkward blank stares and silences.

I would find myself more comfortable conversing with fellow internationals students who spoke like I did. Despite meeting many friendly Americans all around me who were eager to strike up a conversation, there was just something at the back of my head that made me want to end conversations with them as quickly as possible; like it’s just a matter of time before I mumble something that leaves them bewildered.
I have always been a huge soccer fan, and would always find a group of people to play with over the weekend. I eventually became a part of a team that would meet frequently with other groups to play against. These games would often be intense and require great teamwork, and for all of us to be on the same page. We would discuss strategies during the game and direct each other. During the midst of one of these games, I became aware of something: I wasn’t hesitant to communicate during these games at all. There were Americans on my team and yet because these games always required constant focus, I realized that I had been constantly communicating with my team without holding anything back. Better yet, they never had any issue understanding me.

I thought I wasn’t anxious about coming here, but I was wrong. I was, and I had let this anxiousness manifest into an irrational fear. I was overthinking every interaction and exaggerating to myself how awkward the situation might be if I used an unfamiliar term. Sure, people might take an extra second, but people generally almost always understood what I was trying to say.

It dawned on me that everyone in college is anxious about something, and eager to make friends. I used to think it was merely me. Once this sunk in, I was able to move past this and truly enjoy MSU. Experiencing my first snow day was just the start. People weren’t kidding when they labelled America the land of opportunity. I was blown away by the sheer number of different experiences there were available for me to explore. I was an Economics major but was able to take classes that deal with the environment and also dabble in biology. When I began to feel like Economics wasn’t for me, once trip to an advisor was enough to change my major to Criminal Justice. I tutored an elementary school kid one semester who was struggling with reading and writing. I spent a semester away in DC and interned on Capitol Hill. Just coming to this one place allowed me to access a plethora of opportunities and fields.

I have been an indecisive person ever since I was a kid, unable to make my mind up when it comes to anything. This is because I find myself always pondering the alternatives to my potential choice and what I might be missing out on. MSU has given me the chance to dabble in almost everything that ever intrigued me. In numerous other places, such as the UK, you are restricted to only what you initially chose and opportunities in that field alone. The sheer flexibility of the system here has left me feeling like I have pursued multiple dreams that I initially thought I would need multiple lifetimes for.

An onset of fear, especially for an international student, is inevitable when you get here because you always fear what you do not understand. Getting into the routine of a MSU student though quickly dissipates any worries. This place does not feel foreign anymore. I could walk all over Grand River and identify every store blindfolded at this point. My mind still hasn’t registered that this is my final semester, as I keep finding myself wondering what to do next semester and planning for it before it hits me that there is no next semester. I have gotten so used to our campus and East Lansing, that I sometimes forget this is not another home I have abroad for me to return to whenever I please. The fact that this journey is ending in a matter of months is bittersweet, but I am nonetheless excited to showcase the new me that MSU crafted.
Winter, 2016

It is early morning on a wintry January day. I am riding the bus to class. As the bus chugs on I look out the window: The weather is dismal, gunmetal, and the trees, shrouded in snow roll past in ghostly, almost eerily silence. Nearly everyone is busy on their cell- phones, chatting, typing away, earphones plugged deep like we are nonexistent in each other’s world. One guy hastily leafing through his handwritten notes. The order is almost clinical.

It is the sound of silence. I have been in the US for slightly over five months, and yet all this-this silence, this mildly impersonal presence even as the bus hisses to a stop now and then, is still somehow disconcerting. But I am learning: we gain education in class and we gain learning out there where hardly everything is as it seems; we are people and we are stories. And some of them are not in the starry dreams I had when my plane touched down on American soil.

Yes, I am aware—even conscious of my swarthy complexion, my hair, my rough voice with a heavy African accent; I am aware too of the occasional glances cast my way when we have discussions on the paralyzed African economy. I look around, and there aren’t many people who look like me.

I am in school—that is how I look at it; some things are taught, others you learn. I am 19, and it is a long way home. But I am here, and the bus brings me ever so near to class.

The Loud Silence

Most times during my morning commute, my mind, as if on cue invariably, involuntarily travels thousands of miles, back to Africa, back home to the City of Nairobi, Kenya, the place where I was born and bred. For a moment I am not in Michigan, I am not on this bus.

You carry a part of your past. It is always that way. I lean against the window and close my eyes. My reverie takes a pattern; and is tinged with some nostalgia. I do not mind the order, the quiet in this CATA bus, but a part of me, so inured to sounds- to loud music, the unhindered conversation carried on in innumerable tongues, and the hooting and hollering by bus conductors are irredeemably Nairobi. The public transport buses and mini-buses that ferry commuters-students, market women, professionals in Nairobi-popularly known as Mats- and their operators are not at all shy.

I am in Nairobi, riding on one of the matatus, heading to the city. Speakers screwed on the bus walls blare with the explicit dispatches of the American Rapper Dr. Dre, segues
into Tupac Shakur and just as effortlessly switches to some local tracks. I nod my head to the beat. Some of the older generations do not seem too amused. But it is morning, and somehow the music is a jolt of energy to spring one right into the day and its predictable humdrum.

**Shards of Glass**

I grew up on the peripheries of the Kenyan capital, in a shantytown known as Majengo which is a Swahili variation for informal housing about 5km from the Nairobi central business district. The city-with its towering, chandeliered buildings nosing the clouds, and lit the night with their neon were a marvel, a dream, and as a boy-like most boys my age, I imagined what went on there: what did the people who lived there eat? What did they wear?

Our rented house; a tiny room housed my single-parent mother and I. It was located across from the biggest second-hand clothes market in Kenya. There was no indoor plumbing. Outside festering garbage reeked its disagreeable breath, the stench of broken sewer occasionally sweeping through the window. The city council workers appeared overwhelmed or unmotivated to maintain a level of decent living conditions.

I attended a local primary school and during the weekends I took up menial jobs from wiping the muddy shoes of shoppers who frequented the expansive clothes market, other times I foraged the landfills to collect scrap metals and other reusable discards and sold them for a few coins. As the man of the house, even at my tender age, the responsibilities thrust upon me by fate helped me mature faster than many of my peers.

But there was something else: I loved to dress, to stand out. Earning my own money helped me acquire stylish but cheaply affordable attire. I imagined I could be a model. Sitting outside the house, I would daydream about the life I hoped to live: I didn’t hope to spend my life in the tenements. There was something inside me-some distant echo from other planets that nudged me to strive for greatness.

During those evenings at the verandah, I could hear the roar of jet planes as they took to the skies: in my dreams, I wondered what it must be like for the birds. I dreamed of hurtling across the sky towards somewhere, towards a vague yet so vivid other. It was a struggle for my mother as she eked out a living on a shoestring; she spent days and nights on her sewing machine for a meager pay but there was no question about it: she wanted her children to live a sunnier life than the one she had been relegated to all her adult life.

**These Dreams are valid**

In March 2016 after emerging one of the best-performing high school students in Kenya, I was ecstatic after I gained admission to Michigan State University on a MasterCard Foundation Scholarship. It had been my school of preference: I had studied up on the history of the school, the Spartan pride, the ancient, sturdy warrior helmet; the vibrant culture, the diversity. It was all there in the brochures.
On the plane ride, I pictured myself striding across campus, holding serve on political, social discourse. Just like I had done in high school. And yes, I envisioned myself meeting a girl on the Broad College corridors and getting swept off my feet—just like in the teen movies. I had naïve written on my forehead.

The reality once I arrived in America was akin to the pictures on the menu and the actual food the waiter plops on the table. I had watched movies and heard first-hand accounts of the bittersweet experiences of being an international student in the USA. I had my own experiences with people who could not bring themselves to look past the color of your skin. I thought all white people were friendly because they all faintly smiled at me. I was wrong as I later came to learn that the smile openly portrayed their racial anxiety and the misconception that conjuring of niceness was an answer to racial bias.

People would leave an empty seat on the bus and opt to stand rather than sit next to a black person. I had never lacked a copious dose of presence back home, but now in America, I was perilously teetering on the brink of depression.

The classroom became my sanctuary; here everything made sense. I was curious about the world of finance, fascinated by figures and the high risk-return ratio life holds. Over time, I gained confidence. I discovered new friends and soon joined several student organizations. I discovered my voice, my space, and understood the intentions of people and their agenda. I developed the intuition about other cultures as well as the courage to share mine. One of the brightest, most fulfilling moments in my stay here was when I was honored to co-organize the first African Business Conference at MSU. There was this facet of diversity as I emerged from my cocoon and flew.

Most of the credit to my turnaround is to a trusted mentor, Helen Dashney. She believed in my potential and gave me the chance to join the Financial Markets Institute (FMI) as a pioneer international scholar. Helen is an embodiment of maternal love—yet tough love, professionalism and abounding with infectious happiness. The FMI has been a career compass— not only did it position me at a great place to kick off my career, but it also helped me to grow professionally and personally. I consider this truly one of the most pivotal moments of my academic- and also social life.

**A Spartan for Keeps: 2020 and Beyond**

It is 2019 and I have come full circle. I am a Spartan, dyed in the tradition of what this represents; a symbol of strength, bravery, nobility, service. It is from this that I have embarked on a journey that I hope will bring change to where I am from: I am still the boy from Majengo, Nairobi dreaming of metal birds, dreaming of a better life.

In a way it seems surreal, the life I am living right now; I have achieved most of the goals I set out to achieve at MSU: I am graduating with high honors, secured a full-time job as an Investment Banker in New York, acquired meaningful and intimate friendships and now it is my time to give back.

I have been able to steer sanitary towels donations to schoolgirls in my neighborhood in Nairobi; It is hardly plausible to most people living in the Western world that in some parts
of Kenya, many girls miss at least 4 days of school because they cannot afford sanitary pads.

I have been invited to speak to young people. In my talks, I tell them that one can rise from anywhere and ascend to the pinnacle of their passion, their dreams. When I look back at that callow, starry-eyed young man with a funny name who stepped out of the plane 4 years ago, I marvel at the opportunities I have had at MSU; it was and has been, the perfect match, like a dove-tail joint finding home in the wedge of a piece of wood, a nut fitting onto a bolt.

I belong here; it is a brotherhood. It is home away from home; I think of all the chance encounters with people from all over the world; people who are now friends and who support my endeavors. I would not trade them for anything. The world is indeed, truly small. We are everyone. I am a Spartan, no matter where the Universe leads me.
Listen to this: what happened here was a miracle.

I thought I should apply to American universities for graduate studies. I mean why not. I had just finished my undergraduate studies in music and Greece was looking more than bleak: we had consumed Europe’s money like feta, and now our situation was desperate. People were losing their houses because of debts, wages were being severely reduced and unemployment was on a significant downfall. Many young people started fleeing Greece in search of work and a future. I didn’t have much of a choice: I had to at least try if I wanted to follow my dream.

I come from a family that started out very poor. My parents did well to provide everything for my brother and I, but I knew there was not any chance my family could afford for me to study in the US. However, I applied anyway, desperately hoping for a scholarship. And, somehow, a miracle happened! I was accepted, with a scholarship, to MSU! At this point I would like to say that Americans are crazy: not only did they accept me into one of the best institutions and music programs in the country, but also they also are helping to pay for my studies?! I would have never been given such an opportunity in Greece. Never. That moment made me feel so grateful and extremely lucky to have a unique chance in realizing my dream. You see, my grandfather was a great singer. Living in poor, rural Greece, he was so famous in the nearby villages that people would walk - due to no busses being available - just to hear him sing. I believe I inherited the passion for music from him. In some way, it seems as if it was fate that gave me a path to become a musician. That path led me here, to Michigan State University.

So, I packed everything (my mother made me pack her food as well!), I got on a plane, and left literally every person I know and love behind. I was all alone in the US. Me and my miracle. I remember my first thought once I landed was how much bigger everything was; the cars, the rooms, the corridors, in general, space seemed infinite in comparison to the tiny European structures. I was waiting in line to pass control when I saw a big American flag looming over me and right at that moment I realised that I was standing in the “land of the free and home of the brave,” the place we constantly watch in films and television series.

Soon, I made friends from all over the world. I drove them crazy asking about their country’s music and customs and culture - I wanted to know everything. Surprisingly to me, people here love Greece! They look at me in awe when I tell them that I am Greek, and ask me so many things: whether we eat a lot of yogurt, whether Chobani is really Greek (it isn’t), how we bankrupted the entire European Union and got away with it and if we walk around wearing sheets for clothes and philosophize (I kid, I kid). To think that I left Greeks only to get to... Spartans! (I love Sparty but guys, seriously, we don’t look like this).
My first impression of Michigan was the cold. It is cold here. Like really cold. I have been dressing up like an onion in order to survive. There is a huge upside to this weather though: the snow. It rarely snows in Greece, and when it does, people get delirious: children are like sugar high running outside in the snow, schools close, people forget how to drive and get into accidents. I am more than excited every time it snows here. Indeed, I seem to be the only one enjoying it so much; all my American friends seem unfairly grumpy to my enthusiasm! Also, people here carry these huge water bottles as if they have to cross a desert to get to class. They also eat fries with mayonnaise! How bizarre! And the biggest fallacy of all, for which there is no atonement: they call football, soccer, and call football a sport where people touch the ball primarily with their hands!

I know I tease a lot, but I only do it because I love Americans. This country has been nothing but generous to me. People in the university have been the most respectful and polite, always creating a safe and accepting environment. You see, I met the love of my life here, and even the mere right to call her that, is not ensured where I come from. Neither is to be judged by not who you love but by your work and ethics. The university environment is more welcoming than home is to me. In addition, it is a great privilege to be surrounded by people dedicated to what they do. Sharing a passion is what made me feel like I belong here, among them. I have met peers from many fields in art and science, who were as enthusiastic about their studies as I am about music. The opportunity to share our passion for what we do made me feel like I am not alone.

Nevertheless, the American society is struggling with many issues that I didn’t have to deal with in Greece. Racism was not on my radar when I was at home: I thought that it had ceased to exist, because the majority of people in Greece look alike, so racism is not an issue we had to deal with. And then I came to America. I was introduced to the reality of people of color and Native Americans, the injustices they face and the efforts to change this situation. This and the fact that my partner is an African American woman, made me more aware and broadened my horizons. My art now is perfused with references and inspiration from the culture and struggle of people of color and Native Americans. I feel that their struggle is my struggle too. My music is constantly trying to remind and educate people on these issues.

Living in the US and studying in a top American university, has had a huge impact on me as a person and musician. I grew in many ways: my knowledge advanced as did my understanding and empathy. I might be away from home, but I feel that I have made a new family here, of people just like me: following a miracle.