

2023 International Student Essay Contest

Prompt:

“Finding My Place at MSU” How have you found a sense of belonging at MSU? What activities or groups of people have become your community in East Lansing? As you adjust to your studies and your life at MSU, what are you learning about yourself?"

Winners:

Best Overall Essay, Qasim Zulfiqar
Best Graduate Essay, Sunyoung Park
Best Undergraduate Essay, Gaby Cuéllar

Content:

Finding My Place At MSU	Pages 2-4
Qasim Zulfiqar	
A Letter To My Dear Friend	Pages 5-7
Sunyoung Park	
I Found A Home	Pages 8-9
Gaby Cuéllar	

Finding My Place At MSU

Qasim Zulfiqar

They say if you see a cardinal as you embark on a new journey, it is a sign of good and exciting things to come. Now, I am not one to believe in any omens or signs, both good and bad; and I am most definitely not a bird watcher. Yet, I remember the first time I saw the magnificent bright red bird, its tail bobbing up and down as it sat on the snow-covered branches of Michigan Holly at the edge of Spartan Village. I wouldn't have noticed it if my wife hadn't pointed it out and even then, it took me a few moments to see it, and the only reason I remember it is because of the cold; sharp skin piercing, toe freezing cold. We had just landed in the US two days ago and it was the first time we were out as a family, with our six-month-old daughter, and it was the first time we were seeing this much snow. All I could think about was my own stupidity on bringing my family out in these harsh conditions, worrying if my daughter was warm enough and holding my wife's hand so she wouldn't slip on the ice, obviously this was before we discovered the most wonderful footwear known to man, 'snow boots'. So, you can very well imagine my lack of interest in some bird or what it represented, but now after a year, I wonder if there is some truth to it. Native American's believed that the cardinal represents good fortune, strength and determination and if anything would be an apt description of my first year in MSU it would be these three words.

Coming from an extremely family centric culture; where no event was complete without the whole extended family being involved, where from birth to death and everything that came in between, you are always surrounded by family and friends; my biggest fear was being alone. Now, I would be in a whole new country on the other side of the globe; foreign culture, new people and on top of that left hand drive and that too in the harsh Michigan winters.

However, it didn't take long for me to understand that your position on the globe doesn't matter, the sun rises in the east and sets in the west, the grass is green, the sky blue, the birds sing the same songs, the moon follows the same phases, the seasons change, and life goes on. And all us humans are alike, we may have different colors, speak in different languages, eat different foods, but we all have a heart that beats, eyes that see and love that we give.

I would like to believe that some people find it easy to dive into new experiences, that uncertainty doesn't make them break into metaphorical hives, unfortunately, I am not such a person, I need to be on top of everything, I have to be sure that there is a solid plan down to the exact minute, all my bases covered and all possible variables thought of and dealt with. And still I need to recheck a couple of times, my wife thinks it is anxiety, but I think it is just being cautious, so coming to MSU wasn't as simple as applying to a university, getting the admission, packing my bags and coming over. For me the process had a million little steps, from the first click on the application form till stepping into my first class. I must have exchanged at least a few dozen emails with the OISS advisor and the Graduate Studies Assistant, including a couple of phone calls. And through this all, they remained not only helpful but also patient, answering all my queries, ensuring the whole process went smoothly, from subject enrollment to on-

campus living. This correspondence played a major role in helping me look forward to the start of my graduate studies, tapper off any doubts I had been having and finally begin to enjoy the process.

I sometimes wonder, would it have been different had I joined MSU in the fall semester instead of spring, if my first steps in East Lansing were during the magical Michigan summers and watching the vibrant fall colors seep into the world around me would have somehow changed my perspective of life here. But looking back, I know that I wouldn't change a single thing about the past year, figuring out life under the wintry quilt of snow has made me grateful for the start of this new chapter in my life, with so many new characters, who started off as strangers but with kind smiles and helpful hands, soon became part of my family here at MSU, their warmth driving away the winter chill.

This family includes friends from Pakistan; we applied in the university together, celebrated each acceptance letter together and flew 7700 miles together, leaving all that was familiar behind with a promise to always be there when needed, in both the good times and in the bad, we promised to be brothers, a promise unspoken but resonating with each heartbeat. In those early days life had a rose-colored tint to it; getting our apartment keys together, walking to the campus for the first time because none of us knew the bus routes. The first trip to Meijer, the first OISS coffee hour; meeting so many individuals from different nations. The first time all of us went out to eat with our families at Sparty Kabob, figuring out how to use the public laundry, the first spontaneous snow fight on our way to the water filtration point in Spartan Village, one slipped and fell and instead of helping him, the rest started laughing, soon snowballs were flying, and four grown men were rolling around in the snow.

Adjustment to life in MSU would not have been this seamless had it not been the kindness of the then president of the 'Pakistan Student Association'. Here was this man who I had never met, our correspondence limited to a few emails and messages, yet the night we landed in Lansing there he was, waiting at the airport with a group of friends to greet us. In those first two months when we didn't have a car, he would drive to Spartan Village every weekend and take us anywhere we needed to go, we never had to ask him, somehow, he was always there. He was the one who introduced me to my advisor, and he was the one who took us to MSU Dairy for the first time.

Michigan State University has made me fall in love with civil engineering all over again, I wake up excited to go to class, after a long day I am physically tired but mentally satisfied, getting my hands dirty in the soil lab gets me giddy like a child at the beginning of summer. The moment when complex equations start making sense, the joy of being able to talk about the latest research with my peers who reciprocate my enthusiasm and on top of that making new friends along the way.

MSU has exposed me to ideologies foreign to me, introduced me to beliefs that I would otherwise never have come across, it has helped break down stereotypes I had unconsciously made in my mind, it has compelled me to see from different point of views, open the windows

of my mind, to let in new thoughts and ideas. It has made me more accepting, more open to change. I am surrounded by people from across the globe, introduced to new cultures and traditions, and from them I have learnt that no matter our differences there is always something that unites us. So, I rejoice in what is common and celebrate what is different.

On most weekends we like to walk along the Red Cedar, our now eighteen months old daughter holding my hand on one side and her mother's finger on the other, occasionally stopping to watch geese or wave at anyone who smiles at her, until we reach behind the library. There we like to have a picnic under a tree but soon I am the only one left on the blanket reading a book, as my two favorite girls are lured closer by the rumble of the river, watching them walk bare feet on the grass laughing and twirling, feeding the ducks is my favorite part of the week.

I am so grateful that not only are these two enjoying life here but also thriving. The Student Parent Recourse Center, has ensured that our daughter's social calendar is busier than ours, has introduced us to other parents here on campus so that we can find the village needed to raise our child. The International Spouse Connections, helped my wife adapt to life in the US, helped her feel comfortable enough to step out of her shell and slowly spread her wings, watching the nervous look in her eyes as she stepped out of our apartment alone for the first time disappear and transform into excitement has been an absolute delight, she has made new friends and found her place in the community.

Passing through the campus, I am always fascinated by everyone walking these roads going about their day, heads down, air pods in, each with an individual style, some chatting others stoic, I see people of all colors, of all ages, of all majors, I see the introverts and I see the extroverts, I see able bodied and I see disabled, all different, yet all the same, all Spartans and I think to myself how lucky I am to be one of them. So, when somebody shouts Go Green my voice also joins the chorus that sings Go White!

A Letter To My Dear Friend

Sunyoung Park

Dear my friend, MK,

Here I am, sitting at a round table on the fourth floor of Wells Hall, around the corner of the elevator. Waiting for the sunset. Window walls facing the west embrace the expansive sky that slowly is changing its color toward the end of the day. I feel as if I am watching a symphony orchestra performance of natural colors. From the typical Michigan sky blue, touching with elegant pink, submerging into blood orange, then marching toward calm indigo. I am inhaling and exhaling deep, long breaths. As the sun goes around to the other side of the earth and the daylight gets dimmed, everything on the ground is losing its vibrant color and is muted. The window wall right in front of me seems to get bored with projecting the dark and slowly turns its focus toward reflecting the bright inside. I am staring at the mirrored logo, *Michigan State*, on my sweatshirt, and there is *me*. A subtle smile appears on my mirrored face. After the sunset on a random Tuesday, I am sitting at the round table on the fourth floor of Wells Hall, which used to be *your* “secret” spot for alone time. I am thinking of you.

How is your life going in a different state? Are you enjoying your research project with the new team? I bet you have already made many friends because you are genuinely kind and caring. I can't wait to hear about all the adventures in your new work and life! I really hope you don't stay up all night as you used to do when you were here. Since you graduated and left for your job, East Lansing feels a little strange to me, which I guess comes from a mixed feeling of being nostalgic about our time together and being realistic about our limited time at MSU. Remember those days when we felt safe to be together while working until late at night in the office? Every now and then, I walk along the Red Cedar River and cannot *not* reminisce the night you danced in the moonlight as we strolled to have a break from study. I sometimes go to coffee shops near your old apartment, and it immediately brings me those memories of us spending hours writing papers or talking about our research projects over numerous coffees and teas. I go to your favorite sushi restaurant for lunch at times, where I used to make fun of your poor chopstick skills. I'm keeping the video clip of you practicing chopsticks until you finally gave up and shifted to using a fork. It is still funny and cute. Today, I am in Wells Hall. Whenever I want to see the sunset and need “me time,” I sneak out of the office and come sit at the same table here. Just like the day you knocked on my office door saying, “Let's go to see the sunset. I have a secret spot.” I cannot not think about how supportive you were, of me.

I had thought I was managing my first year in the doctoral program pretty well until the day I ran into you in the office hallway. With a big smile, you asked me, “How are you?” Having had much conscious practice of American greetings, I answered, “I am good! How are you?” Of course, I did not forget to smile back. However, you did not say “Good. Thanks!” as people would usually do. You instead took one step closer to me and looked into my eyes. That was the moment. That was when I realized that I had been pretending to be confident with what I was

doing in this whole new environment. I thought I carried the "I got this!" spirit well. Between me and myself, however, I was not content but fragile. *How on earth can this girl read my mind?* I was confused. Though I tried to stay cool in front of you, I could already feel my face turning into a weird mixture of a broken smile and pure despair. You were literally checking if I was doing okay because you could obviously see the fear in my eyes. More precisely, it was because you went through the exact same confusion about a third identity, living in the states as an international graduate student. You saw me through your first-year experience with empathy and kindly approached me whispering, "As international students, we are like a family. I will be here for you." You gave me a warm hug.

Since then, I gave up on making up my American persona and instead presented myself with the *real* me. It released the pressure that I got to behave and think like Americans when I am in America. Phew. Developing a third identity involves not only being curious and open-minded toward cultural differences but also accepting your past experiences in your home country. I started to share my stories and experiences from my home country with you and people. You did the same to me. It did not matter to me that you are from an even more exotic culture than America to which I had no prior exposure. We were just open to each other, supportive of each other, and grateful for having each other.

It was much later that you explained how vulnerable *you* were in your first year of the program. I had no clue because you always seemed to have the right amount of confidence balanced with a mild attitude. So, it was surprising to hear your side of the story during our team's first potluck gathering. I remember being thrilled to bring some Korean food to my first potluck experience and then feeling desperate during the lunch because I could not get any cultural references that all the other American fellows brought up. It was bizarre to understand their English word by word and still cannot get the meanings. I felt like I was invisible. On the other side of the lunch table, however, you were so happy to hear my Korean accent. It made you feel relieved in that you were not the only one on the team who has a foreign accent, you said. As I listened to you, I also felt relieved because I realized that I was not the only one who could not jump into a conversation about American TV shows. When you are an obvious outsider of a group, it is hard to remember that everyone has their own idiosyncrasies. It consumes our emotions as if we are imposters. Thankfully, as a *family*, you and I could bond with each other while taking our time to get familiar with the cultural references. Like you were there for me, I was there for you.

Next year, we will have a new international student in our program, and I volunteered as a student mentor for him. He is from a country located below the equator and is very excited to see real snow during the winter in Michigan for the first time in his life! In his email, I could clearly sense both the excitement about a new chapter of his life and the anxiety about assimilating into the American culture. He recently asked me if I have any suggestions for him to be well-prepared for a new life at MSU as an international student. I cannot guarantee him that his transition will be as smooth as most would hope, but whenever he needs alone time to catch his breath, I will bring him here to this round table on the fourth floor of Wells Hall. I will let him take his time and watch the sunset orchestra. He will slowly learn that it is better to be

genuinely himself while figuring out his third identity as an international graduate student in the states. I will be there for him just like you were for me. And I will tell him, "As international students, we are like a family. I am here for you."

Until we can reunite to cook our fusion Korean-Turkish dinner together, take good care of yourself. You are no longer here in East Lansing, but you are right here in my mind. As my dear friend. As my family. Ciao.

xoxo,
Sunyoung

I Found a Home

Gaby Cuéllar

Coming to the United States was the epitome of a materialized dream. Since I was a little girl, I have wanted to study abroad. Like most families in El Salvador, my family hammered the “American Dream” into my head, and when I reached high school, I dedicated myself to making that dream come true. In December 2018, the Salvadoran government awarded me a scholarship to study for my undergraduate degree. I was ecstatically happy, and my family could not be more proud. The university search started, and all eventually pointed to Michigan State University. They had an excellent business school, an early engagement program for business majors, and the campus looked like it had come out of C.S. Lewis’s imagination.

Back in 2019, everything seemed so easy. I had a plan, and the next four years of my life were going to be fun and relatively uneventful. Life, however, is much more complex than I had imagined. Sometimes, life can be like an erroneous weather forecast or like Michigan’s weather. You wake up expecting a sunny day but get rain and bursts of cold wind. Yet to learn how to play in the rain and be content in the midst is beautiful and rewarding. The fact that I learned how to do this at MSU, I would not trade it for anything.

No one told me what homesickness would feel like. I did not put much thought into the reality of leaving my life in El Salvador behind when I hopped on a plane to East Lansing. Because which part of finally accomplishing one of my biggest dreams would be sad and depressing? It did not make any sense. But waking up to my alarm and not hearing my mother’s voice made me yearn to go back. Maybe it was walking to class alone, not knowing anyone in the lecture hall, or being afraid to speak with Americans because I was insecure about my accent. There were also times where I would say where I was from, and no one would know where El Salvador was on the map. How would they not know where my beautiful country is? It was, and still is, a struggle. Like the struggle of people butchering my name every time and sometimes not bothering to ask how to pronounce it correctly, no one prepared me for it. It felt like parts of my identity were being erased little by little, and all left was a white canvas. Who was I? What am I doing here? How do I feel like I am living again? It took me a while to realize that I was not alone in this journey and that my experience is not one grain of sand in the vast ocean. The first step was just stepping out of my dorm room and joining a group called MRULE.

MRULE and the Intercultural Aid program have been one of the most memorable experiences of the last four years. The roundtable discussions gave me a voice that I did not know I possessed, and they made me think critically about issues that impacted people around me. Every time I entered the McDonel Kiva, I felt welcomed and confident, as if I was reminiscing fragments of myself coming back to life. What made it more special was that people around me noticed that as well, and I was invited to apply to the program and become an ICA. Even though I served as an ICA during COVID, the roundtable discussions and planning sessions were the highlights of my week. I was surrounded by people that cared about making the world, and the MSU community, a better place. I also got the opportunity to connect with a

few international students, and one of them eventually joined the program. Those months were certainly dark and gloomy, but I thank God for the growth I was able to get from the MRULE online community.

Even though I had found a place to grow, I wanted to find a community that provided international students to share our struggles and support each other. One of the biggest hurdles international students encounter is applying for internships and finding full-time jobs in the United States post-graduation. As a business student, I tried joining different organizations in Broad to network with my peers and find support in my journey. Unfortunately, the international student community is underrepresented in most of those spaces, and I just ended up feeling isolated. Was I not intelligent enough to find internships? Did I sound eloquent and friendly during my conversations with people? Thankfully during my fall semester of 2021, I discovered the Broad International Student Council. I am so grateful for the existence of this organization. Currently, I have the privilege of being the Human Resources Committee Chair, and it has been a joy to witness how much BISC has grown in the last year. It is rewarding to have members tell us they feel heard and supported when they come to our meetings. We also have set up a mentorship program, and I just did not think people would ever consider me a mentor and someone to look up to. I have found my people within BISC, and getting to grow professionally with them has been a gift.

Every day at Michigan State University has been an adventure. Seeing my time as an undergraduate student come to an end in May is something I am not fully prepared for, but I am so grateful for this place that I now get to call my second home. I have learned how resilient and brave I am, even in the face of adversity. I have learned to ask for help and rely on people when I need to. I have learned to trust in my abilities, and to stand up for my beliefs and my community. Most importantly, I have learned to love. My time here has made me love El Salvador more, while also embracing my new life in the United States. I have learned how to love myself, even when I have a hard time figuring out my life and the next steps. Because even though life has its twists and turns, I can still have fun and enjoy the ride.