

Dhanya Elsa James

Charlotte Metro Area Relocation Scholarship

Since 5th grade, I always wanted to move to America, a place where I visualized having an amazing lifestyle, friends, and freedom to go anywhere. Growing up, I didn't have my parents around me so as a child I didn't receive much attention. I was seven years old when my younger sister was born. My mom was busy taking care of my younger sister and my dad used to work. On top of that my parents were pretty strict. I was not allowed to go anywhere and also had to ask for permission for the smallest things. When my parents told me we would be moving to America one day I was rejoiced because I expected to get the freedom I had always dreamt of. I constantly prayed, so that one day I could move to America.

Three years passed, and I somewhat forgot about moving: at that point, I had made some friends whom I adored. I had the freedom to go outside, hang out with my friends and explore new places together. This is what I always wanted. I was so happy that I didn't want to change anything. But then my parents told me something that I wasn't quite ready for: the visa process had been completed and we would be moving soon. I had mixed emotions: on the one hand, I was thrilled about the future but on the other, I was not ready to leave behind everything I had. In 2018 October, we visited Chicago to find out more about the place we planned to move to. I was completely mesmerized by the city - it was beautiful with huge buildings, busy streets, and incredible scenery. My relatives made me feel at home. This got me excited because growing up I didn't have many relatives around me in India. After finalizing the move I officially said goodbye to India in June 2019 and moved to the U.S. It was difficult, but I was excited about the future.

After we had been living with my relatives in Chicago for a month, my dad accepted the opportunity to serve as a priest in a North Carolina church. I was happy to move because I had a good impression of Chicago and expected North Carolina to be similar. After moving to Charlotte, my sister and I navigated through the long school enrollment process, which was challenging since we didn't have family support as we had in Chicago. I was excited to attend high school because the American shows and movies I'd watched made it seem interesting. On my first day, I arrived at school and was completely lost. I tried to ask for help from a teacher but couldn't understand her; panicking through the situation, I somehow reached my first block. The students treated me like a stranger, and it seemed as though they didn't want to talk to me. After two months of going to

school, nothing had changed. It was just school and home without the freedom to go. As I mentioned earlier, my parents are very strict so they didn't let me go anywhere. But something worse was waiting for me. During lunch, some kids flipped my food on me and I was in shock. Everybody was laughing; I was humiliated, but still, I kept all of this to myself. In addition to all of this, one of my best friends was not talking to me anymore. The worst part is that I couldn't do anything about it as I had no clue why he was not talking to me. I tried to contact him multiple times but as he lived in India I didn't have many ways to communicate with him.

Things were not in my control anymore. Life could not have gotten any worse. I had lost everything: freedom, friends, and happiness. When Covid hit a year later it did get worse, but I knew I had to fight the tendency to despair. Always trying to hope for the best every single day. This is the time I realized that I needed to motivate myself. I wanted to invest my time trying to plan my future rather than being sad about it.

Later that year, I tried to get out of my comfort zone and build relations with my teachers and also my peers which surprisingly went really well. I wasn't expecting it to go that way because I had thought people would judge me for having a different accent. I had constant fear that I would not be able to fit in. Then, I was able to talk about who I was as a person and talk more about my culture without thinking about what others thought about me. Because I had built a good relationship with my teachers I got access to resources and opportunities. All of these reasons encouraged me to do better. I received an A/B honor roll for all of my semester and also got involved in many extra-curricular activities which helped me become a class representative for Student Government. Meanwhile, I got a job so that I could build some skills like customer service, leadership, and teamwork. I also initiated friendships with peers who had been struggling in different ways and we supported each other.

Due to the hardship I had been through I learned to be there for people in need, take initiative, and not give up. During my junior year, I reached out to freshmen and told them to come talk to me if they ever needed to talk to someone. One of the freshmen opened up to me, and I was happy that I could mentally support her. And when my cousins moved to Charlotte, I helped them navigate through the school process so they didn't face problems like I did. If I could talk to someone about facing a move I would advise them to get out of their comfort zone. It may feel difficult to do so but it will be worthwhile. You shouldn't be ashamed of who you are and try to embrace your culture rather than hiding it. I could have never accomplished my success if I didn't go out of my way to gain the opportunities. You may have a hundred reasons to give up but only one

reason to keep going and always stick with that one reason. I learned that change is very difficult but not giving up makes one ready for life.