MSU WorkLife Office Presents:

SHARING INTERNATIONAL VOICES AT MSU

A photo voice project telling stories about international faculty and staff transitions to the United States.

Showcases ten stories from our faculty and staff about their experiences with a photo that is meaningful to them.

April 13, 2021, East Lansing, MI

About this Project
We aim to project the voices of the writers and allow others to learn from their experiences.
# Message of DEI Commitment

Being Comfortable with Discomfort

My Belgian Tennis Racket

Good Credit at Home; None in U.S.

A Series of Unfortunate Events and a Spelling Error

Continued Story of above

Adjusting to America

The Very First Snowing Day in Michigan

The Medical System is as Complicated as Organic Chemistry

Cheers to New Traditions

My Village

My Favorite Polo Shirt

Continue the Conversation

Acknowledgements

---

**Table of Contents**

Message of DEI Commitment.................................................................01  
Being Comfortable with Discomfort.......................................................02  
My Belgian Tennis Racket......................................................................03  
Good Credit at Home; None in U.S.........................................................04  
A Series of Unfortunate Events and a Spelling Error................................05  
Continued Story of above......................................................................06  
Adjusting to America............................................................................07  
The Very First Snowing Day in Michigan..............................................08  
The Medical System is as Complicated as Organic Chemistry................09  
Cheers to New Traditions......................................................................10  
My Village.............................................................................................11  
My Favorite Polo Shirt..........................................................................12  
Continue the Conversation...................................................................13  
Acknowledgements..............................................................................14

---

**MSU Support for International Faculty and Staff**

- Join the International WorkLife Listserv:  
  [https://worklife.msu.edu/listserv](https://worklife.msu.edu/listserv)
- International Networking Webinar:  
  [https://worklife.msu.edu/events/international-networking-webinar](https://worklife.msu.edu/events/international-networking-webinar)
- New to MSU Resource Page:  
  [https://worklife.msu.edu/relocation-community/international](https://worklife.msu.edu/relocation-community/international)
- New to MSU Guide:  
- International Newcomer Mentoring Program:  
  [https://worklife.msu.edu/international-newcomer-mentoring-program](https://worklife.msu.edu/international-newcomer-mentoring-program)
- MSU International Studies & Programs Department:  
  [https://www.isp.msu.edu/international-centers-units/msu-international-organization/](https://www.isp.msu.edu/international-centers-units/msu-international-organization/)
- MSU Office of Inclusion and Intercultural Initiatives:  
  [https://inclusion.msu.edu/](https://inclusion.msu.edu/)
Michigan State University DEI Statement

At MSU we take great pride in our diversity. Valuing inclusion means providing all who live, learn, and work at the university the opportunity to actively participate in a vibrant, intellectual community that offers a broad range of ideas and perspectives. To benefit from our campus’ diversity, we must embrace the opportunity to learn from each other. At MSU we welcome a full spectrum of experiences, viewpoints, and intellectual approaches because it enriches the conversation and benefits everyone, even as it challenges us to grow and think differently. Our commitment to inclusion means we embrace access to success for all and treat all members of the extended MSU community with fairness and dignity.

MSU WorkLife Office Mission Statement

The WorkLife Office partners with the community to create an inclusive, responsive work environment where all faculty and staff are respected and supported toward well-being in work and personal lives. Reflecting MSU’s values of quality, inclusiveness and connectivity, the WorkLife Office strives for excellence, equity and synergy.
When you have been behind the wheels for 20 years, that includes driving on the world’s highest motorable roads (18,000 feet in the Himalayas), driving should have been the least of concerns when moving to a new place? Ideally yes, unless the steering wheel is on the other side!

Leaving aside the instances when you walk to the passenger side to find the steering wheel missing, or when your American colleague wonders why does he wants to drive my car, there is a more serious implication of this change.

We all know driving is eventually muscle memory and your reflexes get trained for evasive action - even in your least attentive times. But when your reflexes now lead you to take an action that is precisely the opposite of a ‘safe’ action, it is a very unnerving and unsettling feeling. When you turn left in U.S., you watch for oncoming traffic – the exact opposite of what you did for twenty years, look behind! When you turn right in India, you turn only on a green traffic signal – and when the car behind honks, you realize you are now in U.S. The most intuitive of skills suddenly becomes a source of extreme discomfort and a very intentional act. Such is the change moving to U.S. from India can often be!

P.S.: The maximum speeds on most Indian highways is 90 kmph (56 miles per hour). The minimum speed on US highways is 55 mph. It means the intentional driving in U.S. has to be done with much lesser time to validate reflexes.

Venkat Matoory is the Director of Management Consulting Academy in the Eli Broad College of Business.

"The most intuitive of skills suddenly becomes a source of extreme discomfort..."
I landed in the hot Midwest summer, with my Belgian tennis racket. I had told my advisor (whom I had never met and who had offered to welcome me at the airport) that he would recognize my Belgian tennis racket. Soon after, I stopped by the campus intramural sports facility where I posted a “search for tennis partner” note on a large board covered with many, many such messages. I did not think that I had a chance... But I kept hoping that I would soon meet other ladies, also in search of a tennis partner. To my surprise, three gentlemen called me shortly after. I played a few games with each of them and my Belgian tennis racket.

For a while, I wondered why only gentlemen replied to my message...It turns out that the board where I posted my note was actually split into two sections: “Search for female tennis partner” and “Search for male tennis partner”. I had not noticed and, of course, I had posted my note in the male section! After all those years, I still often remind myself of that “mistake” that I made when I landed in the USA for the first time. I was eager to meet colleagues and friends from all over the world, but I was also unaware of the many “rules” that define an unfamiliar culture. My “mistake” made me take an unwanted risk by setting myself up with male tennis partners. Did I give the wrong idea? What if one of them had some ulterior motive for answering my note? I could have been kidnapped, never to be found again.

On the other hand, that first “mistake” did change my life! Sure enough, one of those three tennis partners has now been my husband for 30 years! Yes, it all turned out great, but it still makes me feel uneasy when I see my Belgian tennis racket hanging on the garage wall...

Antoinette Tessmer is an Assistant Professor of Finance in the Eli Broad College of Business.
We were excited to be starting a new adventure in the States after 30+ years in Canada. I was a dual citizen, my husband Canadian, when we moved to East Lansing to join Michigan State. We looked forward to getting to know the university and the town. We chose a home to buy while selling our house in Canada. This would be our sixth home; we were no strangers to the buy/sell/mortgage scene. We each had home-based businesses, credit cards, good credit ratings, and solvent bank accounts in Canada, along with jobs at Michigan State. We were confident and happy to be starting life in Michigan. Until we tried to get a mortgage for the home we had chosen.

Apparently, we had no credit rating in the US, and no credit rating equals bad credit, so we were viewed as a bad risk. No one would lend us money because we had not previously borrowed in the US. And credit is everything, apparently.

When we applied for store credit cards, online applications did not accept our “previous address”, because it was in Canada; applications denied. Car insurance was estimated for us at $3000/year, paid in advance, for our old, fully owned small Toyota, because we had no credit rating. Isn’t car insurance based on our driving records, which were perfect? No – it’s the credit rating.

None of this was making any sense, and the denials and hoops were feeling increasingly insulting, erasing the credibility of our entire adult financial lives. Here we were, in the state I grew up in, now in our 60’s, and nothing we had worked to establish in Canada counted in the US. We were viewed as high risk, unreliable unknowns, starting over.

People from outside the US are used to other ways of doing, documenting, crediting, ascribing risk and value, so all these invisible practices are confusing to international newcomers. And the experience can be utterly alienating and insulting (being called an “alien”, for example!). Or it can feel welcoming and supportive if local people understand that these differences exist and inquire as to how they can help. Ask what someone’s familiarity with US banking is, or US healthcare, or US business practices.

Know that these things are different in different countries; as always - ask, don’t assume. And thank you to MSUFCU, for helping us on our bumpy journey to banking in the US.

Dr. Barbara Roberts is the Executive Director of the MSU WorkLife Office and a Senior Advisor to the Provost.
When I first came to the U.S. – I came as an au-pair to a family with four children – I never thought I’d stay more than a year. And because I stayed, it was smart to exchange my international driver’s license with a Michigan Driver’s License especially if the driver’s exam was a piece of cake. When I picked up my license, I was somewhat upset seeing my name misspelled. Stefanie was written with a “ph,” an error that happened a lot but I didn’t point it out to the Secretary of State officer, something it turned out I later regretted.

It was December 13, and I was all packed to go visit my family in Austria for Christmas but wanted to get a quick workout in and wish happy holidays to a few friends at the nearby gym before I left. As I leave my host family’s home at 5:30 am, I realized quickly I had a flat tire. My host mother was out of town, so I decided to use her car, something I had done in the past.

I drove off and like in the past I turned right on red, at a nearby intersection when a police car’s flashing light took me by surprise. I pulled into the parking lot. I rolled down my window when the officer told me that there was now a “no-turn-on-red sign.” I dug for my license realizing I had taken the license out of my wallet the night before to put with my passport. I apologized, spelled my name, “S – T- E – F – A – N – I – E B – A – I – E – R“ and handed over the registration.

Finally, the police officer returned to me after what seemed like an eternity, when another police car pulled up. An officer almost blinded me holding a gigantic flashlight into my face, asking me why I couldn’t spell my name. It then dawned on me that my license still carried my misspelled name thus I did not appear in their system. It also turned out the registration of the car was expired. Sobbing, I attempted to explain but I was either inaudible or incredible to the police officers.

To recap: There I am, a woman with an accent, no driver’s license, in a car that belonged to someone else with an expired registration, at 5:30 am saying I packed my suitcase the previous night and had taken my driver’s license out of my wallet as I prepared to leave the country. – Well, how does that sound?

In a sharper tone, the officer asked “Where at home would your driver’s license be and who could get it?
Continued...

In tears, but knowing it was in my bathroom, I called my host father to look for it but he in his half-asleep state could not locate it. Still, at least there was someone who could attest that I wasn’t illegal and that I had an identity.

This didn’t prevent them from putting me into the back of their police car, which was frightening. Were they going to take me to jail? Looking through teary eyes, I could tell the cops were not on high alert anymore, but was I under arrest?

Without any clear explanation I was handed my documents, and a ticket I didn’t look at until I arrived at home, as I was shaking and unable to process all that had happened.

My host family feeling bad for me was kind and paid for the ticket. However, not knowing that I could fight the ticket in court, I had several points on my record that haunted me for seven years. The memory of the situation is still very alive, and what was traumatizing at the time has become a funny story about how Stefanie was arrested.

I now always make sure I double-check every document for the spelling of my name, and yet I receive mail with my name misspelled. Sometimes, it seems meticulous to point to point out to people they misspelled my first name, using a “ph” instead of “f.” Yet, my experience shows that an arrest could be made based on a minor traffic offense and a spelling error.

Dr. Stefanie Baier is a Curriculum Development Director in The MSU Graduate School.

"There I am, a woman with an accent, no driver's license, in a car that belonged to someone else with an expired registration..."
Moving across the Pacific Ocean from eastern China to the Midwest of the US was a bold decision, which indeed made a lot of changes to my family, though it is an exciting experience, a journey full of beautifulness and sweetness.

When I first arrived in Michigan during the beginning of Fall, the sightseeing was fascinating. While I’ve also witnessed the winter storm in mid-November, inches of snow overnight is just unbelievable! To be honest, that was almost all the snow I have seen during the past three decades in my hometown. Well, the great thing is that in our little son’s mind, Michigan’s winter is awesome, though it is a little bit longer. We enjoyed the beautiful nature here in Michigan, from the lower peninsula to the upper.

The lifestyle here is different from that of Shanghai, where most of the young people are busy keeping a fast pace in the concrete forest. For the new work at Michigan State University, I think we have a much better work-life balance here.

There is a long checklist to do to make life beginning here smooth enough. The first two are to find a place to live and buy a car to commute. The good thing is I can find all the information from the internet websites, government agencies, and coworkers, to learn how to rent an apartment, how to get a driver’s license. Believe it or not, it was my first time to write a personal check to pay the rent, and I googled to learn how to fill out the boxes! I have never used checks in China because people use a smartphone to pay. And I’ve also got a serious notice of indictment on my apartment door for the later payment after we went back from a three-day no-signal forest camping vacation, which somehow deepens my understanding of how the US society works.

I was told before that independence is one of the most important traits of the American people. We have bought a single-family house in the third year in the US and do feel that is. For the first time, we did a lot of things that have never been done before. From cleaning the carpet to cleaning the roof moss. From mowing the grass to blowing the leaves. Even fighting with the wasp nest inside the siding. Such a unique experience let us truly know the usual side of most American people’s life. You can do a lot of things if you are willing to learn and work hard in the US, and every time you will be rewarded, and be surprised by yourself.

The US is a country of immigrants, our friends here come from different places of the world, speaking different languages, they are friendly, we’re getting used to such kind of life, and are grateful for all of these. Together we’re looking forward to a better tomorrow.

"a journey full of beautifulness and sweetness"
The Very First Snowing day in Michigan

Written by Md Nafiujjaman; Bangladesh

I was born and grew up in Bangladesh and travelled to a few countries including Texas, USA for studies purposes before traveling to Michigan. This journey was weird and memorable in sense. After more than 8000 miles flown, we reached Michigan from Bangladesh. We had almost 23 hours total of that journey.

Actually, it was a boring Journey. My wife and I were so tired when we reached Lansing airport and it was almost midnight, maybe even 1:00 am. That day’s temperature was probably -7°C and there was also a heavy snowfall all over the place. Our first impression was horrible. There was almost nobody at the airport except passengers. After we landed, most of the passengers left with their personal cars.

I figured out that there were only two airport personnel in the whole airport and the internet was not working properly. I could not contact my friends due to the poor internet connections. However, my previous phone number was not working due to it not being used for a long time, as a result, the operator blocked my number. Due to the poor internet connections here in Lansing airport, we could not call an Uber. So, we were in an uncertain situation at that moment.

Luckily one of the Bangladesh couples we were accompanied with in the airport was also waiting for their friends to pick them up. The student community of MSU helped us a lot to get out of that uncertain situation. Thank you to the MSU students for their rides. Though we planned out everything before our journey, there were other mistakes that we made and for those, we really suffered a lot. One of them was that we brought all our heavy clothes but forgot about snow boots. It was really difficult for us to walk in the snow when we went outside. The roads were so slippery. We felt we are in Antarctica, everywhere snowing and whitish.

So, my advice would be, please make sure to contact a friend before coming and tell them your flight time, so that he can be present at that time in the airport to receive you. There could also be an arrangement from the university to receive or make an arrangement for the student. And definitely, bring all your protection clothes for this mighty winter in Michigan.

Dr. Md Nafiujjaman is a Research Associate in the Institute for Quantitative Health Science and Engineering.

"Though we planned out everything before our journey, there were other mistakes..."
**The Medical System is as Complicated as Organic Chemistry**

Written by Yu-Ya Liang; Taiwan

"DON’T call an ambulance unless I’m dying.”
This is a joke that many international students have heard. The complexity of the medical system and the price in the U.S. are surprisingly high. I never know how much I need to pay before I seek medical services. And I can never imagine that you may negotiate the medical bill. Sometimes, you even pay less when you don’t have medical insurance.

**Menu in a bubble tea shop**
There are many different kinds of medical plans in the U.S., such as PPO, HMO, HSA, dental, vision, and even prescription. Each of them even has a different co-pay, coverage, and different doctors you can visit. In order to understand the policy, you may need to take three hours and make tons of phone calls to each company.

I had a PPO health plan when I was a graduate student, which is less painful. A year ago, I moved to Michigan and changed to my current HMO healthcare plan. I read the insurance policy, did a little research, and chose a cool primary doctor using my BCBSM app. However, when I tried to make my first appointment, the clinic said, “Sorry, we don’t take new patients.” It was the first time I realized that some primary care clinics don’t take new patients. After a few phone calls and rejection by two or three clinics, my appointment was kindly redirected to a local Health Center that provides preventative care to the area’s homeless. Holy...All I want was the second shot of the Hepatitis B vaccine.

**Fish Chef, pantry Chef, and pastry Chef**
There are many categories of doctors, just like cis-trans somerism. Your primary doctor may not be able to do a Pap smear during the annual physical exam. Likewise, your dentist CANNOT fix all your problems. My roommate once had wisdom teeth inflammation, and her dentist told her, “You need to see an oral surgeon in the hospital.” After the referral, she had to wait for more than a month to see the oral surgeon to determine whether two of her wisdom teeth can be removed. One day, before visited the oral surgeon, she was sent to the ER when she had shortness of breath in class. She paid about $2,000 and got some anti-inflammatory pills after checked out. After the final exam in the semester, she purchased a flight ticket for the next day and flew home to see a dentist. It took her less than a week and $5 to get all her problems fixed in one clinic.

People from outside the U.S. may not be familiar with the medical system. The good thing is that most Universities provide on-campus and user-friendly clinics for students. I can’t imagine how difficult it is for international faculty, staff, and spouses who just moved to the U.S. It would be good to include this part in the welcome package or orientation.

Dr. Yu-Ya Liang is a Research Associate in the Department of Plant Biology.
When I first arrived in Michigan in the Summer of 2013, a new life adventure was beginning. Not only was I a newlywed, but I was now in a new country to start a new job, in a new lab, in a place I did not know. Far from France, my home country.

I had wanted to live in the US for years before moving to East Lansing, although I was picturing myself living in New York! I noticed after a few months here, the question colleagues or neighbors were always asking me first was “Aren’t you bored in East Lansing coming from Paris?”. No, I wasn’t. Life was somewhat easier – the most striking example is that I only had a short 8-minute drive from my apartment to the lab, a big change from my 3-hours-a-day commute during my PhD! Of course, it was hard to see my friends only via social media and it was difficult to schedule Skype calls with our families, but this was our new normal. We were settling in this new life that we were happy to live.

Our first Thanksgiving was in November 2013 – a holiday I never got to celebrate before living in the US. Thanksgiving is for many the time of year to go back home for a few days and enjoy an epic meal with the family. It kick starts the Holidays season, that time of year to be festive and cheerful. Looking back, we had a good time that day. During the few days leading up to it though, I realized that although this holiday weekend was foreign to me, I envied people around me for having a plan and a place to go to!

In 2014, I experienced firsthand the concept of Friendsgiving – we gathered with friends from all over the world, cooked all day, had dinner, and just simply enjoyed the fact that we were there for each other. It also was the first time I cooked a 20-something-pound turkey!

After now 7 years and 7 Thanksgiving weekends, I celebrate this new tradition with the family I created here – my friends. I love cooking the turkey and preparing the gravy (my favorite thing!), thinking about the sides we will have, and I am always, always, looking forward to having a sandwich with all the leftovers!

Ironically, our families in France ask for a picture of the turkey and our plates every year, and wish they were here with us. And I am thankful to be able to share this piece of our new tradition with them!

"this was our new normal"

Dr. Anne-Sophie Bohrer is Senior Research Associate at the Great Lakes Bioenergy Research Center.
My Village

Written by Matea Caluk; Bosnia and Herzegovina

When I first moved to the United States, the strangest thing I immediately noticed was that people did not take off their shoes upon entering someone’s home. This was a shocking observation, considering that I would never, under any circumstance, enter any home in Bosnia with my outside shoes on.

Prior to moving to the U.S., I’d never even seen someone wear tennis shoes in the house. My mom, and every other Bosnian mom, would probably lose her mind if I ran across her carpets in my tennis shoes. In Bosnia, as soon as you enter, you remove your shoes and you put on some house shoes that the host will offer you. The host will often have many types of house shoes on hand, "so your feet are not cold." There’s a specific space by the front door where shoes are left, in the warmer months, they are left outside. In the summer, you will often find mounds of shoes outside of houses and hear vibrant and exciting conversations echoing through the windows -- Bosnians are very loud, too!

This photo symbolizes way more than shoes for me though. It symbolizes the difference in the way of life in the U.S. and in my home country. Back home, anyone, at any time, could stop by your house for coffee or a conversation, unannounced. Families assure they have coffee, sugar, some sweets and other beverages handy -- "just in case someone drops by." There is a sense of community. There is a sense of acceptance. There is a village mentality -- also because many folx live in villages. Everyone looks out for one another. Kids are left to play outside. Any parent in the vicinity will keep an eye on them, as if they were their own, no formal supervision needed.

In the U.S., however, I have learned a different way of life. One where shoes are often worn in the house. One where time is of the essence. One where to do anything, you have to make an appointment. You may not see friends, or even family, in months! Stopping by someone’s residence is almost unheard of. Leaving kids to play outside without individual adult supervision is looked down upon. It’s certainly a drastic change of pace, scenery, everything. After all of these years, I still often struggle to feel a sense of belonging. It’s always like living in two different worlds...So at the end of the day, taking my shoes off before entering any home will always be a reminder that I yearn for community, a sense of belonging and my "village."

Matea Caluk is the Assistant Director in the Title IX Prevention, Outreach, and Education Center.
My Favorite Polo Shirt

Written by Anonymous; Netherlands

I’d like to share with you my intercultural encounter moving to the U.S. for the first time as a student. This was in the early 2000s and I generally felt confident that my western European cultural background had sufficiently prepared me to “fit in” right away on an American college campus.

On one of my first days, I wore an almost fluorescent lime green-colored polo-shirt to class. Whether imagined or real, I did notice people looking at me. Perhaps I felt that I was being looked at simply because I myself felt out of my comfort zone, or perhaps it was indeed because of my polo shirt. You see, at the time, these incredibly bright shirts were in fashion among European university students and I thought nothing of what I wore on my American campus that day.

As soon as I made some American friends, however, they kindly notified me that I stood out quite a bit with my bright shirt. I was not offended and I was not embarrassed, but I was immediately hyper-aware of our differences and what I was wearing and thinking back of what I had been wearing during the first few weeks in the United States. My suitcase was full of bright shirts! In fact, one of my first responses was to go to the nearby mall and shop “as an American,” with guidance from my new friends.

After that, I kept wearing whatever I wanted; sometimes my new American clothes, and sometimes my European look (and being comfortable in both). I was aware that I didn’t mind standing out sometimes, but that I wanted to fit in most of the time, hence the shopping at American Eagle and Hollister.

My polo shirt is a reminder to me that moving between cultures is difficult. What feels comfortable in our home culture, can be seen as standing out in another. Finding a good balance and not losing ourselves while trying to fit in is worthwhile pursuit, but definitely challenging.

"I was aware that I didn't mind standing out sometimes, but that I wanted to fit in most of the time..."
Continue the Conversation

Share
Pass along the booklet to friends, family, and colleagues.

Engage
Start conversations with others about how their experiences are unique and can be challenging.

Participate
Help international faculty, staff, and students through their transitions to the United States.

Advocate
Donate to or volunteer with The Friendship House at MSU through this link: http://friendshiphousemsu.global/

Learn
Attend webinars or events, conduct individual research, or engage in reading materials that help understand their experiences at a deeper level.
Thank you to...

The following MSU Departments:

- Institute for Quantitative Health Science & Engineering
- GREAT LAKES BIOENERGY RESEARCH CENTER
- Broad College of Business
- Plant Biology
- PREVENTION OUTREACH & EDUCATION
- WorkLife Office

Julia Shine
project coordinator,
international photo voice project

Julia is a student intern for the MSU WorkLife Office. She is pursuing a bachelor's degree in social work and after graduating in the Spring of 2021, hopes to join the recruiting field. She has thoroughly enjoyed getting to know the faculty and staff through their images and stories.

A special thank you to The School of Social Work Undergraduate Research Initiative for inspiring this booklet. Cited here: