

MY HUG-LOVING HOMETOWN, MY NEW AMERICAN DREAM

by Karen S. Zhang

“We all have different purposes when coming to America. Some people come here for work, some people for education, some for a good life, some others are for shelter,” an Iraqi man said at a meeting in the public library to practice English. He eyed his thirty-something, scarfed wife by his side and continued, “We’re fortunate to take refuge here in Virginia.”

Specifically, he was referring to his new home in Centreville, Virginia, a town about 22 miles west of Washington DC. His words resonated with the audience sitting around the table. There were grandparents from Russia, a French teacher from Morocco, housewives from Korea, newlyweds from Honduras, a student from Pakistan, and a businesswoman from Peru. The room fell into brief silence after a vigorous discussion about where we came from.

Like the Iraqi couple, I am also a newcomer to Centreville. But the reason for my settling in this neighborhood is none of the above mentioned. Marriage brought me here. A year ago after my grad school in Pittsburgh, I followed my sweetheart to his Virginia home, a three-story corner town house in a peaceful residential development. From the house, I see wide roads crisscrossing one another, adorned with the changing colors of four seasons. Together with the dense canopies of trees and the high wood fences, the enclosed back yards often intrigue pedestrians to wonder what lies inside. Parked vehicles in front of rows of town houses, on both sides of the streets, and oftentimes in the driveway have shown me how many people have found homes in this lesser known suburban neighborhood near Washington DC.

For months, I had believed I was living in an unknown suburban area in America. Unlike Pittsburgh—the only American city I have lived in since I left my mother country China—with its fame of national sports and steelmaking history, few Americans are familiar with Centreville, Virginia. Unless I connect the dots with Washington DC or with the nearby historic battle ground—Bull Run, Virginia—people may exhale an “Oh yea!” after realizing the proximity. It is easier for me to tell my folks in China that I am living in Washington DC than getting into an arduous explanation about Centreville’s location. After all, few back home know the geographic difference between Virginia and Maryland except that the White House is in Washington DC.

Centre-ville, in French means “city center.” Yet, the Centreville that I find home feels more like a sprawling hub for capital region commuters. Unlike many cities, there is no town center, no municipal offices, and no designated business district with entertainment, restaurants and stores galore. Sitting on a ridge where spectators in the Civil War time once watched the battles of Bull Run, the city has a breathtaking view of the Blue Ridge Mountains. The long and flat mountain range skirts my horizon in the distance.

I was once told that people in America care less about where you come from but more about where you go to. Watching the incessant traffic flowing through the neighborhood, I can feel that the fast tempo of Washingtonians’ life is ticking to the second. Everyone seems to be on

the run. Perhaps sitting down for a cup of coffee is too much time to lose. Perhaps walking up on a moving Metro escalator is a signature of rushing metropolitans. Perhaps the pull of the destination outweighs the attractions on a commuter's journey. Perhaps this is the American dream that people are pursuing, a dream that brings people from all over the country and the world together to strive for.

No one will argue that a nation's capital provides the most secure jobs and stable life. No one will disagree that Washington DC is a multicultural city. Likewise, its peripheral areas welcome immigrants. Indians, Chinese, Koreans, Lebanese, Russians, Brazilians, Ghanaians, Salvadorans, Mexicans, you name them. Look, the staff workers behind the counter in my local post office are immigrants of numerous ethnic background—Iranian, Vietnamese, Korean, Bolivian. So are workers in the hospital, in the library and in the hotels. I am always lost in the tones of various languages spoken around me. But the undecipherable cadences have also reminded me of my being in a diverse Washington metropolis. When a friendly cashier greets me in Korean “an nyoung ha seh yo,” I wish I could say something native to her rather than being tongue-tied.

A few weeks ago before daybreak, I went outside of my house to water the tomato plants as usual. This is how I like to begin my day. With stars blinking in the indigo sky and crickets chirping, the neighborhood was still in deep slumber. It was nearly unnoticeable to me in the dim streetlights when occasional vehicles quietly zipped by and early risers walked their dogs. As I was filling up the watering can, an elderly Asian woman walked up to me, trying to say something. She caught me by surprise. I stopped what I was doing and listened closely. Her rapid speech sounded foreign and futile. As soon as she saw bewilderment on my face, her eyes widened and her voice rose. She grabbed my arm and brought me closer to the tomato plants. She pointed at the leafy plants, continuing her indecipherable speech. She flailed her arms as if to show me the meaning of big. I thought nodding my head was a polite way to end such an unproductive conversation. Who knows why the elderly woman bent down on her knees and began pulling off the excessive leaves at the bottom of the tomato plants? After a few minutes, a pile of big green leaves lay on the ground like defeated soldiers.

“Beautiful,” the elderly woman said after her unrelenting trimming of my tomato plants. She showed her hand gestured upward, suggesting the plants now would grow fast and tall. And most importantly, with *big* fruits. She closed her hands with a big shape of O.

“Beautiful,” I repeated, assuming she might understand some English. I went on, “It's my first time to grow tomatoes. Thanks for your advice.”

She nodded her head at the English word of “beautiful.” But she spoke some more in her native tongue. Perhaps the rest of my words had puzzled her.

“Korean?” she asked, her eyes beaming.

“No, Chinese,” I said.

“Chinese. Oh—” she sighed as if she had come to a revelation. She opened her arms and gave me a huge hug like a good old friend. She waved goodbye to me before she disappeared in the morning mist.

I had not got her name.

I am still shocked by that warm welcoming hug from a Korean neighbor. In Chinese culture, you don't speak to strangers, let alone give a hug to them. I used to think cultural differences create gaps among people rather than unite them. But in hug-loving America, an intolerable manner in my culture may become an approving norm. A simple "hello" to a neighbor may be the first step to gain your acceptance by the community.

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For some reason, Centreville draws tens of thousands of Asian immigrants, in particular Koreans. Local businesses are mainly run by Korean American merchants. From restaurants to dry cleaners, from beauty salons to video shops, it is no exaggeration to call the city a Korean town. I have never been to Korea. But living in Centreville makes me feel like living in Korea. The Korean language can be spotted easily as if Koreans are showing a declaration of ownership. In addition to English, the store signs, the menus, and the imported Korean products sold in the supermarkets are written in Korean. Even the local library has Korean books on the shelves.

No landmarks in Centreville are better known than the competing Korean supermarkets. As you walk in the in-store deli, the air is filled with the pungent smell of kimchi (a traditional fermented Korean dish) and many other Korean preserved goodies. From cucumber to radish, from cabbage to bean sprouts, Korean women prepare them with a variety of traditional seasonings. All these aromas mix together, making this customer's mouth water. On weekends, the food sampling is like a festival, drawing a big crowd. The sample stations display dozens of prepared delicacies with names that look foreign to English readers. Dynamic Korean pop music permeates every corner of the store. On the other side of the store, Korean-speaking customers are inquiring about the Korean cosmetics and herbal medicines. If only I knew Korean.

When I lived in Pittsburgh as a foreign student, the locals told me that the city had not attracted immigrants for years, so the local economy grew slowly. In other words, immigrants will help a town to thrive. Centreville is living proof. With appealing pricing, local businesses are scattered in the strip malls, competing with mega-retailers like Wal-Mart and Target. While politicians are touting their stimulus plan on domestic economy, immigrants have made a humble contribution to the new community that they call home.

Until six months ago, it had never occurred to me to reach out to my community. I went to the library on the spur of the moment to look for possible jobs. In her forties, an Asian woman librarian at the information desk pulled out a form and explained to me in careful English several volunteer positions.

"At the moment, the library only has a few volunteer openings," she said. She passed me the form and continued, "If you're interested in volunteering, you may fill out this form. I'll leave it with the branch manager."

"Thanks." I said, struggling to believe that my Master's degree could not land a library job. "By the way, how do you like your job?"

“Not bad,” the librarian said. She brushed her dark front bang as if stealing a few seconds for her to think about this abrupt question from a stranger. “I am glad that I can be of help to others. This is how volunteering fulfills my life.”

“Are you a volunteer?” I asked. I had thought librarians are all paid.

“Yes. We have many volunteers working in the library. I’m sure you’ll enjoy your volunteer experience like I do.”

She is right. My understanding of the community is deepening. I volunteer to help people who are non-English native speakers to practice spoken English. People who come from all walks of life, who speak different mother languages, who have found homes in the neighborhood, or maybe are only temporary visitors, come together to learn to speak the same language, to share their commonalities and differences, and most of all, to build a sense of community.

That satisfaction is beyond words. Over the course of time, some participants have conquered fear to speak up in English, others have called English their own. I marvel at the courage the participants have taken to reach out. If it is not because of meeting them regularly, I would not have known how much I am yearning to make new friends, how much of my knowledge can benefit others. When they come to thank me for my help with their English, I say to them, “You’ve helped me to understand my community.”

Centreville may be small but it reflects tens of thousands of little towns across the country established by generations of immigrants. At least to me, this is where my American residential life begins. When I first moved in Centreville, I was curious about the seemingly omnipresent Korean churches. Bilingual banners and signs are posted around the buildings. In fact, in every corner across the country where there are inhabitants, there is usually a church. The most striking architecture in any one-horse town is often a steepled church. Although Centreville is not a known historic town, its recent immigrants follow the same path to build churches, signifying the permanence of a settlement. As a venue for immigrants to share faith, churches are also where people can find a sense of belonging.

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Years ago I heard about some overseas Chinese seniors having difficulty adapting to their new lives in America. In addition to language barrier, they had no friends and no emotional attachment to the community. Although I only have lived in Centreville for fifteen months, I gradually realize it is tough for an immigrant to survive in a foreign country. It is tougher if you choose to isolate yourself from the community. Perhaps this is why that senior Korean neighbor did not want to seclude herself. She came out of her way to show me how to grow tomatoes. Her big hug to me may be a sign of proving to herself that she has reached out.

Like people often say, except for the American Indians, everyone in America is an immigrant or a descendent of an immigrant. Perhaps this makes the value of building a community of love and care even higher in this country. Centreville may not have notable attractions but what it has are the down-to-earth and industrious immigrants who work hard to

build a community. We have some experienced Korean hairstylists who can handle Asian women's tricky, long, straight hair. Korean style coffee shops often house a good collection of delicious bakeries. The Vietnamese pho bistro has a booming business, often crowded with returning patrons. There are a number of stores in Centreville selling ethnic food. Because of the convenience of doing Chinese grocery shopping, I sometimes have forgotten I am living in America. I often tell my friends jokingly that I have only moved from a large group of thirteen hundred million Chinese people to a much smaller Chinese community.

Although my Chinese appearance is often mistaken for Korean, my ignorance of Korean soon gives me away. The Korean names like Gooldaegee BBQ or Soo Won Galbi Restaurant often challenge me. It takes me months to remember a nearby Korean supermarket named "Hanaro." Just as I can say it right, the place is renamed as H-Mart. Changes in Centreville may be out of the league of China's rapid development. But the simple change in the ownership of a storefront or the periodical resurfacing of an old road always brings me a thrill.

As the Iraqi man says, people have different purposes when coming to America. But we are all here to make a better life. With the influx of more immigrants, there will be even more communities around the capital region like Centreville, modest and thriving. There I see how our support for local businesses can invigorate the economy, how a modern community is built on a shared vision and open communication, and how my participation can add to the strength of the community. Perhaps, with a shared sense of community, this is a renewed definition of the American dream.

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