

## Immigrants' Stories

Answer the following for your assigned story:

1. List where the person came from and the reasons that this person came to the United States.
2. List the positive and negative effects of this person being in the United States.
3. What difficulties did this person face when he/she first arrived?
4. How do you feel about this person being in the United States? Explain.

### Tania

Tania Ivanova left the Soviet Union twelve years ago when she was thirty-two years old. Today, she lives in a large city with her two children and her husband. Her husband Vartan, a musician, had defected from the communist Soviet Union in the mid-1980s during a trip to the United States. Separated from her husband for years, she did not know if she would ever see him again.

After decades of hostility, the political situation between the United States and the Soviet Union began to improve in the late 1980s. At the same time, the Soviet Union underwent changes so massive that it began to crumble. In 1991, Tania, worried about a return to power of the old-style communists, followed Vartan to the United States with her two children.

While her husband has acquired a green card, Tania's visa expired long ago. She and her children are in the United States illegally. Tania makes a good living giving private violin lessons. She doesn't pay taxes—although she says she would willingly pay them, she is afraid that doing so will call attention to her and subject her to arrest or deportation. She does not want to return to Russia—making a living as a musician there would be even harder than it is in the United States. She likes her life here and her many students appreciate her a great deal. Her children are Americanized and remember little of their lives in Russia.

Tania owns a car and lives in a house that she and her husband purchased. Both of her children attend public schools and plan to go to college and live in the United States. She is afraid to attempt to resolve her visa issues because she is worried that she might be de-

ported or forced to stop working—something her family could not afford.

### Maria

Maria Lopez is from Venezuela, where she earned her bachelor's degree in engineering at a technical university. After graduation she worked for a few months in a company which designed products to be used in the medical arena. She met her husband in Caracas, and they had two children while Maria was in her twenties. When Maria was thirty her husband died in an accident on the oil rig where he worked, and Maria was unsure where to turn. Because she had been out of the workforce for several years, she was not able to secure a job in the small Venezuelan engineering and technology sector.

Maria knew she would need more training to succeed in the biotech industry. She applied for a PhD program in medical robotics at a large research university in the northeastern United States, and to her surprise was accepted with a full academic scholarship. Maria's sister begged Maria to take her two children with her as well, as she felt her children would have a better opportunity with an American education. Maria therefore left Caracas with four children, all of whom she pretended were hers.

Since Maria had no income while she was a student, she and the children lived with an elderly woman who needed some personal care and light chores done around the house. The elderly woman provided food for the additional five people out of her own retirement funds. Maria did not pay rent, and her children attended the local suburban schools, where they were all enrolled in bilingual

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education programs. One of Maria's sister's children, who had asthma, was frequently at the emergency room with flare-ups, as the university did not pay for health care for dependents, and Maria could not afford to purchase health care for four children.

Maria and her children have lived with the older woman for several years while Maria works on her dissertation, which despite her academic strengths is taking longer than she anticipated. Maria hopes when she finally graduates from her program that she will be able to contribute to the biotech industry in the United States—an industry much in need of highly trained scientists—and that she might arrange for her sister to be reunited in the United States with the children.

### The Alis

Famine and war in Somalia in the early 1990s led to a huge refugee crisis, with massive numbers of displaced persons in the East African country. In 1994, Mr. Ali, along with his wife and their six children fled to Kenya where they lived in a refugee camp for three years. In 1997 they were relocated to Atlanta in the United States.

Accustomed to a small village in Somalia, the Alis found Atlanta's expensive housing costs, busy streets, high crime rates, and scattered Somali population to be overwhelming. Somali friends living in a small city in Maine told the Alis of their happiness over their friendly community, the affordable housing, and the local school system. In 2001, the Alis decided to leave the big city and join their Somali friends in their smaller city in Maine.

For the first year in their new home the Alis collected welfare checks in order to survive while they readjusted and found jobs. Many of the Somalis in the city utilize the welfare system for a period of time. Having spent three years in Atlanta prior to their move to Maine, Mr. Ali and his family can all speak English relatively well. Nonetheless, they are grateful that the city provides translators to help them with school lessons and doctors' visits. Both parents and the two oldest chil-

dren take evening English classes at the local community center. These classes are taught free of charge.

Many native city residents are very concerned that their social services are being over-burdened and their funds drained by the nearly 1,500 Somali refugees who have recently moved into their small city. Others, however, welcome the increase in population and diversity. Although the city's financial resources are taxed by the newcomers, the city receives more school funding because of the increasing population. Some racial tension exists between the native white, Christian population and the newly arriving black, Muslim Somalis. There is also some unrest within each group stemming from differing views on the new residents.

Mr. Ali currently works for a small accounting firm in the town, while his wife still searches for employment. Their children enjoy school and are making friends. They play most often with other Somali children, though three of them play on the town soccer team with local residents, and one of them sings in the school chorus. The family attends religious services at the new storefront mosque on Main Street.

Many of the Alis' friends and extended family members live elsewhere in the United States. Loving their new home in Maine, they want them to join them there. The Alis, like many of the long-time residents, however, do not want to overextend the resources of the town. They are encouraging others to come, but ask them to give the town some time to adjust to the large numbers of Somalis who have already arrived.

### Daniel

Daniel first entered the United States illegally as a teenager in 1980, crossing the U.S.-Mexican border to join his older brother. He settled with his brother in a small farming town outside of Fresno, California. Despite his illegal status, he was able to attend high school. He had a lot of difficulty at first because he did not speak English, but he met

some classmates and a bilingual teacher who helped him to adjust. He took some classes in carpentry that he enjoyed because of the opportunity to work with others on building useful things. He learned how to use power tools, read blueprints, and design projects with a team. Daniel graduated from high school and obtained a driver's license.

After graduation he worked with his brother for one of the area's largest grape growers. He soon proved himself to be a quick learner, rising in a few years from farm hand to trusted foreman. As foreman Daniel made improvements to the work flow. Occasionally Daniel and his brother would suffer minor injuries while working, but they did not seek medical attention because it was too expensive.

Daniel returned frequently to his native village in Mexico to attend weddings, funerals, and other family functions. On one such trip, Daniel married a woman from his village and returned with her to the United States to set down roots. The couple rented a two-bedroom house from his employer. He and his wife had two children who were born at a local public hospital that did not charge the family for their medical expenses. Daniel built a doll house for his daughter and some skateboard ramps for this son. Both children are now finishing high school. The family does not have enough money to send the children to college, so if they decide to go, the children will have to work for a few years to save up enough to pay for tuition. In 1989, Daniel and his family were granted U.S. citizenship under a special law passed in 1986.

### Zi-qiang

Zi-qiang was a medical student in China before coming to the United States. He left his homeland in 1990 after the Chinese government cracked down on China's growing student democracy movement. Like thousands of other young Chinese involved in the movement, Zi-qiang was granted political asylum in the United States. When he first arrived in the United States he came to Chinatown in San Francisco. Zi-qiang was not able to continue his medical studies right away because

of problems with having his credits transferred from a Chinese to an American university. It was difficult for him to find an American university that would recognize the studies he already had done in China.

For two years Zi-qiang worked in a restaurant in Chinatown while he learned English. He also enrolled in a local community college to take the classes that the American medical schools said he needed to have on his transcript. It was difficult for Zi-qiang to manage working, taking classes, and living without his immediate family.

Finally Zi-qiang was able to resume his medical education in Nebraska. He moved there in 1992 and specialized in surgery. In developing his skills as a surgeon, Zi-qiang has been exposed to technologies and techniques that were not available in China. At the same time, Zi-qiang's American colleagues have benefited from his knowledge of traditional Chinese medicine. For the last ten years Zi-qiang has been practicing in Lincoln, Nebraska. He is active in the Chinese community of Nebraska, and regularly visits the local Chinese school to speak with young Chinese-American students about his experiences.

### Roberto

In June 2002 Roberto, then sixteen, left Guatemala to join his two older brothers who were living in New Jersey. One of Roberto's brothers gave him \$6,000 to finance the trip. Roberto's father took him to a city about an hour from their home and said goodbye to him there. It was difficult for Roberto to leave because he knew that the route to America would be dangerous. It was also hard for Roberto's father to see his third son leave but he was hopeful for a better life for Roberto in the United States.

Roberto spent the first night in a hotel. The next day began at 3:30 in the morning, when he started his trip across the country to meet the *coyote*, or paid guide/smuggler, who would help him to make the rest of the journey to the United States. He arrived in the agreed-on location about thirteen hours after leaving the

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hotel. From there, Roberto had a difficult and lengthy journey across Guatemala and then Mexico. Sometimes he was alone, sometimes with others. He took three bus rides, four cab rides, three truck rides, one boat ride, and one airplane ride to get to the border between the United States and Mexico. He was never sure when his money would run out or if he might be caught. He was approached by Mexican and Guatemalan police many times but always was allowed to proceed. When finally he and his group reached the U.S.-Mexican border he had no shoes and no money. The group hid during the day and started to cross that night in the dark. Roberto was caught by the U.S. border patrol, but released locally in a Mexican border town. His *coyote* was detained.

A few days later, Roberto and about one hundred other immigrants crossed the border again. This time they started during the day. After a full day and night of walking barefoot in the desert they arrived in a small town in Arizona. There, friends of Roberto's *coyote* took him to Los Angeles. From there he took a plane flight to New Jersey to be reunited with his brothers.

Roberto attends high school and lives with his older brothers in a small apartment. One brother works in a restaurant and the other for a moving company. For Roberto, one of the most difficult things to get used to in the United States is the weather, which is much colder than Guatemala. He plays on the school soccer team and has several friends from Central America. He is older than most native-born American students in his class because he had to spend much of the first years of his life in the United States learning English.

### Nowa

Nowa came to the United States from Liberia. She arrived in 2005, having made the trip from Monrovia, the capital of Liberia, to

Philadelphia by airplane. During the 1990s Liberia was engulfed in civil war. Some of Nowa's friends were killed during the war, and she knows of many children whose hands were cut off by fighters.

When fighting started in Monrovia when she was seven, Nowa was separated from her mother, with whom she lived. She relied on the kindness of neighbors who took her in and kept her safe.

Trying to find her mother and also to escape the fighting, Nowa walked to neighboring Sierra Leone with her new caretakers. Without anything to live on, she went to the nearest refugee camp. About five thousand Liberian refugees were living there. In the camp a social worker helped Nowa to be reunited with her father's relatives. For eight years Nowa lived with her relatives and her father in Sierra Leone. Finally, in 2004 the Red Cross located Nowa to let her know that her mother was looking for her. Her mother had gone to America as a refugee and remarried there. Now she was sponsoring Nowa's trip.

There is a large Liberian community in Philadelphia. Nowa finds the opportunities in the United States much greater than those in Liberia. She attends church regularly and has made an easy transition to school as she already spoke English. She is grateful to have food on the table every day and to be able to go to school. Philadelphia has been losing native-born residents for some years and increasingly relies on workers arriving from abroad. Nowa's mother and stepfather both work at the University of Pennsylvania. Her mother is a dining hall cook and her father is an athletic trainer.

Nowa hopes that the new president of Liberia can restore peace, but she does not have plans to go back. Nowa wants to be a teacher when she grows up.