

17 Hours

International Student Experience Scholarship — Campus Community

Grand Valley State University · Winter 2026

I
The Departure

Being 17 hours away from home,
Away from your family,
Away from everyone you love,
Is no joke.

Seventeen hours of travel,
Countless emotions,
And one big leap toward my dreams.

Dreams require discipline. And discipline is a choice.

A choice you make when comfort is no longer an option.

I chose discipline in an airport terminal,
Holding a one-way ticket,
To Grand Rapids, Michigan.

When the goodbye lasted too long.
When my mother smiled through tears.
When my father said, “*Be strong*”,
And I had to be.

II

The First Friend

On the other side of the world,
There was *Rachel*,
Waiting at the airport,
Smiling through my jet-lagged confusion,
As if she already knew I was lost.

We fumbled over a SIM card,
Asked strangers, checked signs,
Laughed nervously when neither of us had a clue.
Every small step felt like climbing a mountain,
But she stayed beside me.

After the long flight, she led me to dinner,
Letting me breathe,
Letting me belong,
Without ever saying I had to.

Later, she dropped me at the hotel,
Waving goodbye like it was nothing,
But it felt like **everything**.

Rachel is someone I will never forget. The first friend I made here, the first person to make me feel that I could belong, even 17 hours from home.

III
The Arrival

The first night in Allendale felt too quiet.
Too wide.
Too different.

Pew campus halls didn't feel like mine yet.
I sat in the back row,
Rehearsing sentences in my head before speaking them out loud,
Afraid my accent would arrive before my ideas did.

Starting over meant learning how to exist twice:
Once in memory,
And once in a place that did not know my name,

YET.

I thought the hardest part was behind me.
That distance was something I could measure.
That 17 hours was just a number.

Then everything shifted.

A promised GA fell through.
The stability I was building began to crack.
And one night, my phone rang.
My mother's voice trembled across the miles.

"Mahdi, they took everything and left us with nothing."

Our bank accounts were frozen: every year of saving, every sacrifice, every plan for my future,
Locked away in an instant.

IV
The Care Team

The ground dropped beneath me.
I didn't know how to move forward.
I didn't know if I could.

For the first time, those 17 hours didn't feel like distance,
They felt like isolation.
And there was nowhere to fall.

Then *Katie*, from *the Care Team*, reached out.
She listened. She guided me.
She broke the impossible into actions I could actually take.
She showed me how to move forward when everything else fails.
She offered reassurance when doubt was louder than hope.

Perhaps all I needed was someone to listen.
Someone to care.
A hand I didn't have to hold.
And that was enough to begin again.

The Care Team made me realize that this university was not just a destination, but a community willing to fight for me when I could not fight alone.

I didn't know the path forward.

I didn't know which steps would get me closer to my goals,
Or if I even had the tools to reach them.

So I kept showing up.

Over and over, I visited *Holli* during office hours.

Each time, she listened, asked questions,

And helped me refine my plans.

Sometimes it was small adjustments.

Sometimes it was rethinking everything I thought I knew.

I left those meetings tired, unsure, but clearer than before.

Each visit was a quiet building block toward the future I wanted.

Every plan she helped me sharpen,

Every step we mapped together,

Reminded me that progress doesn't happen all at once.

It happens in persistence,

In the daily grind,

In showing up even when no one notices.

Through those weeks and months,

I learned more than strategy.

I learned patience. I learned resilience.

I learned that asking for guidance is not weakness,

And that growth often comes in small, repeated steps.

Holli showed me how to turn uncertainty into action. She made me realize that even 17 hours from home, I could build a future I believed in: one office hour at a time.

VI
The First Seat

Certainty comes after patience.

Patience I learned between office hours
And late nights studying in the library.

Patience I practiced the first time a classmate said,
“I like your perspective—I never thought about it that way.”

*And suddenly,
My voice didn’t feel foreign.*

Belief grows quietly.
It turns lonely nights after Fresh closed into quiet ambition.
It turns snowy walks past the clock tower
Into reminders that I survived another day
17 hours away from home.

Legacy isn’t loud at the beginning.
The beginning is where comfort tries to pull you back.

But I stayed.

I stayed when Michigan winter felt colder than anything I had ever known,
When homesickness sat beside me in Kirkhof
While everyone else seemed to belong naturally.

And then, one day,
Someone saved me a seat.

It wasn’t home—but it was something close.

VII
Growth

Everything I endured:
The long nights,
The uncertainty,
The 17 hours from home,
Was not in vain.
It was the soil where growth takes root.

By the end of my first semester, I earned a 3.94 GPA.

Seventeen hours away from home no longer feels like distance.
It feels like proof that I chose growth over comfort,
Belief over fear,
Action over hesitation.

The student who once sat in the back row, rehearsing every word,
Now raises a hand without practicing first.
Every milestone confirms I am moving forward.
Every challenge becomes a chance to reach higher.
Every choice brings me closer to the future I envisioned.

I choose to trust the version of me that boarded that flight.

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Grateful for the International Student Office, who showed me I was not alone.

For every professor and every faculty member,

Who helped me belong, guided me, and made growth possible.

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