

It Begins with Curiosity

People often assume that international students arrive in America worried only about exams and grades. Those things matter, of course. But when my plane landed in the United States, the question on my mind was far more basic. *What am I going to eat?*

Where I come from, food is a serious matter. I grew up in Nairobi, Kenya, in a culture where food is how families talk and how people show you belong. When a guest walks into a Kenyan home, the first question isn't "How are you?" It is "Have you eaten?" If the answer is no, the conversation ends right there. The host is already walking to the kitchen.

So, when I arrived in the United States, I had one very serious concern. "Would I survive American food?" I had heard stories. People told me Americans ate cold sandwiches for lunch. Cold sandwiches! In Kenya, a sandwich is what you eat while waiting for the real food to finish cooking. I also heard about something called "pizza." I had seen pictures of it online. It looked interesting, but I had many questions. Why was the bread flat? Why was the cheese melted like that?

My first weeks in America were a cultural adventure. Everything felt new. The weather was different. The classrooms were different. Even the way people greeted one other was different. But the biggest difference was conversation. Back home in Kenya, people talk slowly. We explain things. We tell stories. In America, people speak fast. Very fast. Sometimes I would listen to someone talking and think, "*Did that sentence just sprint past me?*"

I remember sitting in my first class, my heart pounding as everyone introduced themselves. When it was my turn, I stood up and spoke carefully, hoping people would understand my accent. "My name is Christopher. I am from Kenya." There is a small pause that happens when you are from another country. It lasts about two seconds. But inside those two seconds, your brain runs through a thousand thoughts.

Did they understand me?

Did I say it correctly?

Do they think my accent is strange?

Then, something unexpected happened. Someone said, "That's awesome." Another student asked, "What's Kenya like?" And suddenly the room was filled with curiosity instead of confusion. That moment taught me something crucial. Diversity does not begin with understanding. Rather it begins with curiosity. That is the first thing I would tell any

new international student. People here are more curious than you think. Your unique background isn't a barrier. It's an invitation for connection.

That curiosity became the foundation of my time in GVSU. I started sharing pieces of my culture with people around me. I explained Kenyan food. I told stories about growing up in Nairobi. I described matatus, which are our colorful public buses that blast music while racing through the city like they are competing in the Olympics.

In return, my friends introduced me to their world. They showed me American traditions. Thanksgiving dinners. Fourth of July fireworks. Halloween costumes. Super Bowl Sundays. And of course, American food.

One evening, a friend said, "You need to try Chicago deep dish pizza. It's a Midwest legend." I had seen pictures of pizza before. But what arrived at the table that night was not pizza. It was a monument. This thing had walls of crust and layers of cheese. It looked less like a meal and more like a construction project. I stared at it. "Are we eating this," I asked, "or are we renting an apartment inside it?" Everyone laughed. But when I finally took a bite, something surprising happened. I loved it.

That was the moment I understood something profound about living in a new culture. Diversity is not about replacing who you are. It is about expanding what you know. It is the realization that your heart has room for more than one definition of home. I did not stop loving Kenyan food. I still miss the meals I grew up with. But now, my world has grown bigger. My idea of comfort food now includes something I had never even imagined, Chicago deep dish pizza.

Looking back, my time at GVSU has been shaped less by textbooks and more by these small conversations. I've learned that curiosity builds bridges faster than assumptions ever could. This experience has fundamentally shaped who I am. It has taught me that connecting with people isn't about finding someone who is exactly like you, but about being open to the beautiful ways they are different. It has replaced my initial worry with a deep sense of gratitude.

If I could go back and stand beside that nervous version of myself on his first day, I would simply put a hand on his shoulder. Back then, everything felt unfamiliar. I didn't yet know that the people around me would respond with curiosity instead of judgment. I didn't yet know that small conversations in classrooms would turn strangers into friends. And I didn't know that one day I would be sitting with friends, laughing about the things that once felt so unfamiliar, and that in that laughter, I would realize I was exactly where I was supposed to be.

Being an international student isn't about immediately understanding a new place. It is about discovering, step by step, that curiosity can turn unfamiliar people into friends and unfamiliar places into home. That has been my unique journey, and it is the journey that awaits any new student willing to ask a question, share a story, and take a bite of something new.