

The Best Country in the World

by Santi Rico '21

Michael Bradley shakes off two defenders and filters the ball for Christian Pulisic to go through one-on-one with the keeper. He gives a quick touch, he shoots, he scores! The US now is up 3-1 against Jamaica and seals their path to the Gold Cup final!

As I let out a deep sigh, I turned and looked at my dad, who was beaming with joy. He stood up from our living room couch and his dark gray beard formed a smile. I realized he was rooting for the U.S. I, on the other hand, always rooted for whoever their opposition was. Not because I hate the U.S., I just have grown to dislike the way my favorite sport is treated in this country. Over the years, having grown up in North Carolina, there has been a stigma surrounding soccer that consists of people saying it is a girl's sport or the sport Latinos like to play. This issue has been addressed by some of American soccer's greats like Alex Morgan and Landan Donovan, but change is slow, especially in the South, where American football is probably the only thing more important than going to Church on Sundays. From these derogatory attitudes, I have come to feel a sense of satisfaction every time the U.S. men's team loses a match. But for my dad, this wasn't the case.

"Are you happy they went through?" I curiously asked.

"Of course!" he exclaimed.

Immediately uncomfortable, I asked, "Why?"

"The U.S. is the best country in the world."

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His words surprised me, as I never heard him say this before. I thought about what living in the U.S. meant to each of us and how different it really was. Spending my formative years in the South caused me to relate with my friends on a lot of things. We liked similar music and hobbies but at the same time, I was always reminded that they were never going to understand what it was like to be different from everyone else. I was never ashamed of my Colombian background and always found an opportunity to express my culture and speak my language, but that did not stop me from feeling lonely. This feeling was probably due to the bubble that I had been in for so long where I had never met anyone that looked or talked like me. That all changed when I graduated, when I came to Carleton College, and certainly when I lived abroad in Switzerland for 4 months. There, I encountered a new feeling of belonging. Maybe it was just not having to explain that I am from *Colombia* in South America and not *Columbia*, South Carolina, or being able to speak a different language in public without being stared at. I knew that my life was meant to continue someplace far away from the fried chicken and barbecue ribs I grew up on.

Unlike me, my father had worked his entire adult life to make a name for himself in the U.S. -- to raise and support a family, to make sure he would spend his golden years indulging in all the luxuries he had seen on American movies and TV shows. A brilliant professor and financial consultant, my father had held many prestigious positions at Colombia's best state universities and banks, but the socioeconomic situation our country was facing in the late 1990s didn't spare my family. My mother was seven months pregnant with me and had a two-year-old baby girl to take care of when my father's bank went under, and thousands of employees were left without a job. One of my father's greatest dreams was to live in the United States, and he saw this as an opportunity to take the first step. After talking with my mother, in August of 2001,

my father, along with a few aunts and uncles, came to the U.S. to start a new life for our whole family, while the rest of us stayed behind. I was only three years old at the time.

Unfortunately, the atrocious events of September 11th, 2001 closed the borders and prevented my father from traveling back to his native country for almost a decade. After overstaying his tourist visa, he was technically an “illegal alien” and was just seen as another threat. His multiple degrees and expert experience weren’t even considered when he applied for jobs. Coming from such a respected status in Colombia to washing cars and sleeping in the streets, my father’s journey is something I will always admire. The driving force that kept him going was the “American Dream,” something we all know well. My dad had this vision ingrained in his mind. He worked every day as hard as he could while he was unable to see his wife and kids for three long years. When the rest of us arrived in the U.S. in 2004, he was already an accountant at a small financial firm in Atlanta. Now about 15 years later, he is the owner of his own financial consulting firm. He accomplished everything he set out to do and surpassed everyone's expectations. I will always be eternally grateful for his sacrifice. But he says he owes it all to the land of opportunity.

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A sense of guilt came over me. I have this desire to do everything I can to leave the U.S. From pursuing graduate school in Switzerland to trying to get an internship in Argentina, I am always looking to see if opportunities abroad arise. I’ve always felt a sense of frustration living in the U.S., which has placed a great deal of guilt on me because I feel as if I am being ungrateful for my dad’s sacrifices. Over the course of my life living in America, I always felt like I didn’t belong. This sentiment was at its peak during our school’s reenactment of Thanksgiving, where I was giving the only one assigned the role of the Native American because I “looked the part” or when my friends would tell me to “speak Mexican”. I knew that their actions weren’t malicious but somehow felt like they would never understand who I really was. Closing in on her 6th year of employment at Bank of America, my mother’s new supervisor told her to leave his office and come back when she learned how to speak English when she accidentally mispronounced a word. My friend’s mom asked me if I knew her Guatemalan housekeeper and proceeded to ask me how I crossed the border legally. I was 12 years old. My family has experienced these acts of ignorance throughout the years and which caused a bitter taste every time we would have to say we were American at Immigration and Customs at the airport. I always rejected the title of being “American”. Even now, I always introduce myself as Colombian. I subconsciously attached ugly experiences to the idea of being “American” and always seem to reject it when it falls upon me.

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Traveling to Europe opened my eyes to the lifestyle of people there. I traveled from Amsterdam to Athens, from Vienna to Lisbon, and fell in love with all of them. In Switzerland, I truly felt at home with my homestay. From our three-hour dinner conversations to the beauty and conservation of nature and history, my stay in Geneva was one filled with a sense of community, relaxation, and productivity. I visited and experienced countless villages and cities throughout my stay and was always welcomed graciously and found that locals were so interested to hear where I came from and what I was doing there. I definitely know that some ethnic groups and political refugees are not given the same treatment throughout Europe and that I was in a position of privilege throughout my travels, but I still found myself feeling a strong affinity to the lifestyle.

While I was out with some friends from the program, we ran into this group of young French guys who quickly caught on that most of the group was American. They laughed at us and talked to us as if we were stupid. The sad thing was that some of the members of our group didn't even notice this type of treatment. I was once again faced with being categorized as American and feeling almost trapped. This never happened to me during my travels alone and it reminded me of that familiar frustration I have battled my whole life.

“How do you even survive with all the school shootings happening every day?”

“How do you even afford a ride to the hospital?”

“Does Trump really have concentration camps?”

Those living in Europe could never imagine growing up in the US and saw it as a dangerous and unwelcoming place which, in reality, can be. Although foreigners form opinions of people depending on what they have been exposed to, our perceptions of places can also be greatly defined by your dreams and aspirations. I noticed many other Europeans had similar views of the U.S., but it reminded me of my father and his vastly different view of America. A great majority of people in Latin America believe that the U.S. is the dreamland of opportunity and wealth. That if you make it here, you're rich. In the U.S., some young people, especially children of immigrants, are so discontent with the current socio-political situation that they seek to either return to their native country or go live somewhere else. Perceptions of place are completely relative, and they depend on your individual goals and dislikes. In Geneva, Switzerland, I found myself feeling a comforting sense of belonging to which I believe was formed by my amazing experiences there. Professionally, it offered me a glimpse into my perspective career and, perhaps my dream life. I was able to intern at an international NGO that takes European education and financial resources to help raise the standard of living of impoverished regions of the world. For the first time in my life, I felt like I could live in a place and not feel like an outsider. This epiphany brought a sense of calmness over me. It made me OK with coming back to live in the U.S. because I knew that I had finally discovered a place out there for me. Now, every time I encounter something that frustrates me here, like the healthcare or education system, I know there is someplace else I will end up. I am grateful for everything this country has given my family and love the people I have met on the way, but I know that the next stage of my life will lead me somewhere else.

After allowing this inner conflict to prevent me from demonstrating the absolute happiness I experienced during my time in Geneva to my parents, I realized that I must come to terms with what I want. I don't want to appear as though I will leave everything that was built for me and just selfishly move somewhere else. I have reached a point where I have to be honest with my family and find a way to say where my dreams will take me, just like my dad's dreams took us out of Colombia. That sense of belonging takes different people different places. Although I don't think of myself as an American, I will always be a Colombian from North Carolina looking for my place in the world. And who knows, I might even support the U.S. soccer team in their next match.

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