

Journey to the West

May Thiri Kyaw

Reflective Memo: *When we were first given this assignment, I was at a loss. I have never heard of a profile essay before, much less written one. I also had no idea who to interview. But then Professor Nishanta came into mind. I met him during our first dorm meeting where he came to introduce himself as our faculty advisor. I remembered him telling us he was from Sri Lanka and how enthusiastic and expressive he was with everything. I had no idea what to expect when I first contacted him, but after the interview, I knew I had chosen the right person. He had so much to say and had so many interesting stories to share. Through that one interview, he taught me so much about living life with optimism and not letting little things get in the way of being happy. It is my hope that, through my writing, the readers will be able to learn from Nishi's unique experience and perspective, as well as gain a better insight on multilingualism.*

The fluorescent lights beamed white and blasts of air escaped the air-conditioners as shoppers rolled their carts down through one aisle after another. But what was an everyday sight for the average American was a whole new cultural experience for Professor Nishanta Rajakaruna, also known as Nishi, who was still, as he put it, “fresh off the boat.” Never having gone shopping before during his life in Sri Lanka, he admitted he would have been completely lost were it not for the help of his university advisor.

As they rolled down their cart aisle after aisle, picking up all the dorm essentials, they came upon the ice cream section. Cool wind blasted Nishi's face as his advisor opened the fridge and pointed to a Ben and Jerry's Cherry Garcia, exclaiming, “You have to try this!” Nishi reached for a pint of the ice cream but froze midway when he saw the \$1.89 price tag. Gears turned in his head as he translated this number into rupees, the Sri Lankan currency. His eyes widened and his jaw dropped as he realized this was equivalent to a week's salary of his parents. Not wanting to say anything to his advisor, he added it to his cart. On that first night, he opened it up and restricted himself to just one spoon of the ice cream. Despite wanting more, his guilt stopped him in his tracks. On the second night, he upgraded to a couple spoons after seeing his roommate use a whole pint of ice cream to make root beer float. By the third night, however, he found himself eating straight out of the container. “And that,” he proclaimed, as he took a bite of his pizza, “was how quickly I became American.”

Now that he was 8322 miles away from home, in a small town in Maine, he learned that he had to “drop the things that were restricting him” if he truly wanted to fit into this new culture. He had let the price of the ice cream keep him from enjoying it the first time around, but fortunately he soon realized that if he



continued, he would never be able to enjoy any of the opportunities presented to him. He knew he had to let go of some things “so that [he] could be who [he] wanted to be.”

This was the story of Professor Nishanta’s very first eye-opening encounter in his first year in the United States. Born in Sri Lanka, Professor Nishanta, who also goes by Nishi, is currently a professor in the Biological Sciences department as well as a faculty advisor of the yak?it’ut’u dorms. Brought up being taught multiple languages, Nishanta revealed that he actually used to speak four languages in total. Sinhalese was Nishi’s first language.

When he moved to Japan at the age of 3 for his father’s graduate research and lived there for three years, he quickly learned Japanese and became fluent in the language. His nickname, Nishi, he tells us, is actually a Japanese word meaning “west.” Then when he came back to Sri Lanka, he learned English and Tamil, another language used on the island that is predominantly spoken by South Indians in school.

“Growing up,” he says, “I never thought of leaving Sri Lanka.” But when civil war broke out in his country and universities were shut down, he had no other choice. With the help of an individual who was a retired engineer who helped Sri Lankan students get into US colleges with scholarships, he was able to attend the College of the Atlantic with a full ride as the very first foreign student at that university.

He recalled that having been in a setting where he was the only international student did not make the transition harder for him, contrary to what one might believe. Because he did not have the option of interacting with other international students, he “was forced to integrate” and he believed that made his transition into the new culture much faster. As an international student myself, his words left a strong impression on me. His words motivated me to immerse myself more into the culture I am now in instead of hanging on to every bit of the one I have left behind.

As the topic shifted over to the lack of diversity here in Cal Poly and how this affects minorities going here, he states that, as foreigners, we should begin to think about the bright side of being a minority in an isolated setting like this. He believes “it works well for us” and that we have a bigger role to play “as an ambassador of another country.” Instead of complaining about “the lack of this and that,” we, as a community, “have to start celebrating what we have” and try to “figure out the best way to make it work rather than pushing things forcefully.”



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When asked if he had ever faced prejudice due to his different language background, he immediately shook his head no, saying, “I don’t have a single story of ever feeling discriminated against.” Although people had a hard time understanding him when he first came to the US due to his heavier accent, it had never been used against him. Nishi proudly says with a wide smile, “I only have a positive story to tell.”

Being in a culture where “people seem to want to celebrate diversity,” Nishi feels has worked well for him. He admits, however, that he has had to work harder and plan further ahead than his American peers when it comes to things like applying for jobs and internships due to his status as an immigrant. But when asked if he ever felt even slightly resentful of all this, he exclaims, “No, not at all! I loved it!” He says that it “made [him] always ahead of the curve.”

Despite all his positive experiences, he acknowledges the struggles other immigrants have faced during their time here and says, “Maybe I’ve just been lucky by being at the right place at the right time.” Whatever the reason, he truly feels he has “had a wonderful life across 28 years in North America.”

Rather than just luck, a large part of his positive experience seems to be a result of his overall optimistic energy that radiates happiness to those around him. Both during and after the interview, student after student passed by, calling out, “Hey, Professor Nishi!” with a grin on their faces and Nishi would always wave back excitedly. It was obvious from these exchanges that he was someone they were genuinely comfortable around.

While people generally tend to dwell on negative experiences and let those hinder them from moving forward, Professor Nishanta takes a different path, only focusing on the bright side of things. He has been able to fit in everywhere he goes. “Now, the problem for me,” he admits, “is not knowing where home is.” Although he has moved some many times and is happy wherever he goes, he feels like something is missing in his life. While his peers settle down into jobs, he is still continuously looking. “I am not rooted anywhere,” he explains. “I move constantly, and I always question what I’m looking for.” As he takes the last bite of his pizza, he says, “So I think that’s a quest I’m going to be on for the rest of my life.”

May Thiri Kyaw is a Civil Engineering major.

Work Cited

Rajakaruna, Nishanta. Personal interview. 10 Oct. 2018.



CONSIDER THIS:

- This profile introduces readers to a way of being in the world that they may or may not have ever thought of. What aspects of Dr. Nishanta’s journey do you relate to? Which part(s) of the profile surprise you?
- What do you think the story about the ice cream illustrates about Dr. Nishanta’s character? What message about Dr. Nishanta do you think the writer intended to convey by including this story?
- What part(s) of this profile make you wish you knew more about this professor? Why? What follow-up questions might you have asked to deepen your knowledge about him?

