



SAMPLE PERSONAL BACKGROUND ESSAY

Everyone was Korean in Seoul. No one was Korean in Prichard. Motorcycles and mopeds crammed Seoul's roads. Trees and flowers lined Prichard's streets. In cosmopolitan Seoul, I was a favorite son showered with attention from a large circle of extended family. In suburban Prichard, knowing no one but my parents, I was the only Asian child in the neighborhood. Indeed immigrating to the U.S. from Korea and settling down in a suburb of Mobile as a twelve-year old child dramatically changed my life. Uprooted from the people I knew and the things I was used to, I felt lonely, helpless, and uncomfortable in my new surroundings. However, I redirected the negative feelings into a force of strength that propelled me to excel in academics. Furthermore, the immigrant experience gave me adaptation skills that helped me as a foreign exchange student in Japan and as a businessman working with people of different cultures and backgrounds.

Pampered materially and nurtured emotionally in Seoul, I lived with relatives close by and a helping hand available whenever I needed it. My school, while stiflingly competitive and committed to regular doses of corporal punishment, presented a system which I understood and was familiar with. Although the neighborhood lacked open areas, it was a close-knit community where children addressed the lady next door as “aunt” and housewives frequently shared recipes. I was completely at home, ethnically, linguistically, and in every other respect.

My new life in Prichard contrasted sharply with my old one in Seoul. The neighborhood, while serene, lacked the extended support network of friends and family I had back home. School frustrated and demoralized me because I had learned only the first fourteen letters of the English alphabet and a few basic words before our arrival. After a fourteen-hour workday in the family restaurant, my exhausted parents were unable to help me. Further compounding my difficulties, I experienced racial bigotry for the first time in my life. Ethnic slurs and insults, which I managed to understand with rapidity, made me painfully aware I was different from others.

In the face of these obstacles, I started to question the purpose behind immigrating to the U.S. Seeing my parents’ exhausted silhouettes seven times a week, I began to understand the motivation behind the move that forever altered my life: a chance at a brighter future in the U.S. Because no one could help us, we had to help ourselves. Armed with this reinvigorating realization, I began to hoist myself out of loneliness, helplessness, and discomfort.

Since my school did not offer remedial English classes for immigrant students, I began studying with only the help of an English-Korean dictionary. Although I was focused and determined, streams of below average grades accompanied my first year in school. Nonetheless, by expending two to three times the effort of others, I started to notice signs of improvement. A well-timed vote of confidence came from my seventh-grade reading instructor, Mr. John Smith. In his class, the highest possible grade — a B — was given to only one student per school year. Aiming for that coveted prize, I managed to improve my grades from a D in the first semester to the B in the final semester. At the year-end award ceremony, Mr. Smith specifically commended my achievement in front of the student body. While I received many other academic accolades in later years, no one validated my efforts and boosted my self-confidence more than that short yet significant praise.

Although it has been fourteen years since I arrived in Prichard, the immigrant experience has strengthened my character in ways that will be professionally and socially beneficial for years to come. As an immigrant child, I learned how to transition from one culture to another. This skill helped me when I had to make that transition again as a foreign exchange student in Japan. Additionally, having experienced the degradation of ethnic bigotry, I have learned to be sensitive toward different people and cultures.



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