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Oslo, Norway

April 19, 2019

Life as a “Norwegian”

On a surprisingly sunny and warm afternoon in Oslo, Norway, I interviewed Saeedah Yaqub, my classmate who was born in Norway and identifies as being Norwegian and Pakistani. I chose Saeedah as someone to interview because although “native Norwegians” are more common, I think seeing and understanding the point of view of a person who is not the “typical” Norwegian would be more beneficial. I was also able to see parts of myself in her as well. Saeedah and I have a lot in common and some of her experiences she encountered, I have gone through something similar. One of those experiences is people always getting confused about our identities because we do not fit the “mold” of a typical person from that country. Saeedah explained to me how in public people will ask her, “Where are you from?” She will kindly reply, “Norway,” and then they take one look at how dark her skin is and her dark hair and they continue to ask, “No, where are you *really* from?” That is where she explains how she was born in Norway, however her parents are refugees from Pakistan. There are other times too where she speaks Norwegian to someone and they look surprised that she can speak it fluently because when they look at her, they think she cannot. I have experienced the same since coming to Norway for my exchange. I will tell people I’m from the United States, and then they will look at me and say, “Oh! I thought you were from China or Japan. Where are you *really* from then?” There’s that same question. I will reply with how my mother is full Alaskan-Native and I am *really* from the US.

As explained in the paragraph above, Saeedah and I seem to share a lot of cultural norms and experiences. First off, we have both grown up being “different” in each of our contexts and have grown up with others assuming our identities based on our looks. Secondly, we both value

the power of education and the impact educators can have on children. A third aspect I noticed is how we are both very family-oriented. For us both, family comes first and we spend lots of time with our families. Despite the similarities, there were some surprises about the Norwegian lifestyle, norms, and habits, which Saeedah happily discussed with me. One aspect about Norwegian life which shocked me is how peaceful, quiet, and shy they are. When in the States, people tend to be more confrontational, welcoming, and outgoing. For example, on public transport if a Norwegian passenger needs you to move, they don't say anything, they simply expect you to know to move. Even when walking down the street, Norwegians are always looking at the ground and never smile or say hi to you. Another aspect that surprised me was how accessible their higher education is in Norway. It is significantly cheaper than university in the States and it is more accessible to people of all ages, not just students after high school. It is even customary for students to take one year off between high school and university, and that is not very common in the States.

All in all, despite being from different countries, Saeedah and I share a lot of cultural norms and experiences with each other. From discovering these similarities as well as differences, my perceptions changed a bit. If anything, they widened. I had the opportunity to learn that there are others like me who do not fit the mold of being "traditionally" from a country. Another person who had experiences like me, from another country. Most importantly, I learned that there is no right or wrong way of being a Norwegian or American, and no matter what you identify with, you should be proud of it. As Saeedah said, "there's no certain way of being 'Norwegian,' as long as you feel Norwegian and you can express yourself and your uniqueness in the community, then you are Norwegian."