

My American Naivete by Prakash Puram



I am originally from India and came to the US to get my MBA from the Univ. of Minnesota in 1979. Even though I had exposure to American culture by watching English movies and visiting the American embassy, I still felt like I did not know everything. A lot of things were new and I had to learn from my personal experiences. Two incidents come to my mind when I think of my days as an international student.

I was quite busy with studies and with limited financial aid, I was always looking for free food. I would keep an eye on events where they would serve free food. One of those was a weekly event – The Gay & Lesbian get-together. I really did not understand as to who it was for, my only focus was to get some free food. So I would promptly go these events and focus on getting a good meal. After a couple of times, one of the people at the event asked me if I was gay. I said that I was gay (British English translation – happy) and merry. Only after having further conversation with him, I realized as to what the event was all about. I stopped going there after this conversation. I really missed my free food and cookies but I was “happy & gay!”.

Since there were very few Indian grocery stores, we had to go to Chicago to buy groceries. During one of those trips, I was driving a friend’s car and I must have been speeding. As I was driving, I saw a car parked on the side of the highway in the center ditch, where the driver was sleeping. I passed him and wondered as to why he was sleeping in the car in a ditch. Before I knew, that car was behind me with flashing lights and a siren. I froze as I did not know as to what was happening. One of my friends who was with me told me to pull over. I asked why, he said the car behind me was an unmarked police car. I was going at 75 miles an hour in 65 mile zone. I got my first speeding ticket. I had to shell out \$160 of my hard earned money. I felt like all my savings were disappearing in front of my eyes. Fast forward to 2018, I feel like I know

the system better and always keep an eye on the signs to see as to what the speed limits are.

Every country has its own culture and rules. It is always interesting to observe and learn from others. It is okay to ask questions when things seem strange or different from what one is used to rather than assuming that we know better. I have learnt a lot from this culture – about the importance of following rules, obeying the law, trusting people, and the importance of giving back to the community through donations and volunteer activities.