

Pursuing the American Dream

Stories & Photographs
of Immigrants in the Grand Valley

This exhibit is part of a **Project Common Ground** effort to create a positive integration experience for immigrant newcomers and our community. The stories and photographs presented here are a tribute to the immigrants living in the Grand Valley of Colorado.

As you read the stories of our immigrant newcomers and see their photographs, we hope that you gain a new appreciation for the individuals who contribute and bring diversity to our community. They seek the same things in life that we all do: opportunities for economic stability, education, health, and happiness.

The stories shared here have been written in the participants' own words. This is what they want you to know about their experiences as an immigrant in the Grand Valley.

About the photographer: **Jane Kramer** is a documentary and fine art photographer in East Lansing, Michigan. As a former ESL instructor, she has worked with immigrants and refugees from around the world. This project, as well as her previous photo documentary work on refugee women in Minnesota, can be viewed at www.janekramerphotography.com.

Thank you to all of our participants, the community members who helped gather stories and organize the exhibit, Jane Kramer, and to the Mesa County Libraries for their collaboration with this effort.

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If you would like more information about **Project Common Ground**, please call (970) 254-6090 or email projectcommonground@yahoo.com.



I am from Krakow, Poland. I came here on a diversity visa because my mom got one for the entire family. This gave me the impression that I was invited to live in the USA, and I'm grateful for this opportunity.

My life has changed a lot since I came to the USA. I had to acquire many new skills. I had to learn American English and become competent in another culture. I learned how language doesn't have to be a barrier if people really want to communicate. I gained life experience and learned how to cope in difficult moments, which immigrants have to face every day. But I also feel fortunate because I have options for myself and my family since America is our second home now.

One of the biggest challenges was to find a decent job, with benefits and an environment where you feel accepted. I can't change the fact that I'm an immigrant. I had to learn to overcome a sense of discomfort when people were telling me that I have "an accent", which made me feel strange and alienated. I really enjoy having a conversation with a native speaker who doesn't even mention my accent because I really appreciate when people "tune in" and really listen to each other's messages, and try to understand and connect with each other...and forget about their fears and prejudice... just enjoy the contact with another human. To me, change is a good experience, because I can learn so much about myself.

I grew up in a big city in Poland and then I moved to Chicago. After arriving in Grand Junction, I never expected anything and was impressed with the cultural life. I met some artists and they created a new, better reality for me and my children. I think humans can connect



through performing some activities together. My children attend painting lessons. It helps them to feel good about who they are. It's all about creating opportunity to better communicate, with less fear factor and more curiosity and appreciation.

I think it was a blessing that we ended up in a small community where we "bump" into each other on so many occasions. As a volunteer, I appreciate being able to serve this community just like everybody else. I felt that we also have something to offer and we would like to share it with those who care. I also noticed that people here are kind and want to interact with us, which makes us feel even more fortunate. I would like to get U.S. citizenship and be able to travel to other countries. I want to help my children to become citizens of the world.

~Ewa



(Raj) We are from Nepal. We had a big chance because we got a green card lottery. Mina won the green card lottery. We moved here in September 2003 because our sponsor lives here. Everybody wants to come to America to get a good job.

(Mina) Culture is different, language is different, everything...it is like a dream come true to us. We never thought about this country, how it going to look like. Nobody in our family ever visited this country, so we did not have any idea about how it is going to be.

(Mina) When I got here my English was zero. In six month we started learning better English so we started making friends. In the first six months it is only our sponsor and my family. That is all we have because we can't speak good English. We don't even drive either. After a couple months we took the English class from the library. We both had a teacher and we agreed to six months, and then our English got better. After one year I started studying for my driver's license and then I started to drive on my own. If you don't drive in the U.S., you feel handicapped. Then I look my CNA test and now I work as a CNA.

(Raj) After two years, I started to go to college to get a higher education, for my LPN. We have done a lot in a short time.

(Mina) The first thing that I really love in America is equality. I mean like if you are a dishwasher, it is fine. They respect the human being.

(Raj) Everybody has the same rights here. If I work as a housekeeper, over there (in Nepal) the manager or the director doesn't want to talk to you.



(Mina) Without me, Raj can't do anything, without him, I can't do anything. We'd be lost.

(Raj) The cart has two wheels, you know, everything needs support to move.

(Mina) Me and my husband are like a part of...two wheels in a cart...if one is broken, the cart won't go.

~Raj & Mina



I came from Ukraine. Originally I am from Siberia. I have lived here more than 5½ years. I found an American man in a singles company in Ukraine, we started to write and he came to Ukraine to visit me. After a while, two years, I was able to come here...to start a family.

I had to study English. I took some English classes before I came here. I knew about two hundred words. I was learning English most of the time by myself. But I'm getting better and better. After a couple months when I came here, I started taking my English classes. The Literacy Center helped me to find a tutor. My first tutor helped me a lot, but it was hard to understand each other. Now my English is much better than it used to be five years ago and I can communicate and understand much better than before.

I like living here very much. It's different compared to Ukraine or Russia. It's very peaceful and beautiful in this country. I like Grand Junction because it is a quiet place. People are very friendly. I think I am so lucky to be here. I'm happy because I have a job here, I have a future here. I have wonderful husband. I definitely like to be here.

I work now as a floral manager. I enjoy working with flowers. My husband works in a greenhouse and he's a salesman. Many times I go to that greenhouse, where he works, to buy some plants or flowers from him. We work in the floral industry together. Someday I hope to change my career. I would like to be a car salesperson or a flight attendant or maybe go to college to study radiology.

I faced several challenges coming to the United States, one of them was driving. I didn't drive a car at all because most of the people in Ukraine



don't use cars, they use public transportation. That was hard, scary a little bit. For the first time, I am comfortable now. I can't say I am the best driver, but I have a driver's license. Actually I went to driving school in Ukraine. It was a little course. I got the experience here. The rules are very different. The next challenge here was a very big event in my life. I became an American citizen. After living here for three years, I had an opportunity to apply for American citizenship. I had an interview in Denver. I had to do some tests. I felt very proud of myself. Now I can speak English, I can drive, and I have an American passport.

~Svetlana



I am from Caracas, Venezuela, a beautiful valley just in front of the Caribbean Sea. I came to the U.S. in January of 2003 with my husband. He came to study for an MBA degree; I came for love, his love.

Coming to the U.S. changed everything in my life. I had to start all over again from the beginning. In my country I was a Chemical Engineer from a very prestigious institution, I had a good job, family and friends. To summarize, I had a LIFE. When I just got here, I was just another foreigner. I had nobody, just my husband, who was very busy at the time, and I had the English vocabulary of a one-year-old baby. I lost count of how many times I went to bed in tears during those first months.

Language and loneliness have been so far the most difficult challenges for me. The cultural differences can make you feel isolated sometimes, and the lack of words to express yourself surely makes these feelings a lot worse. Even though I appreciate every hard moment that I have faced, even more than the good ones, every one of them made me grow inside and somehow become a better person.

Grand Junction is a beautiful city. I love the people, the weather, and the landscape. In many ways I feel like I found a new home here. Last year my husband and I bought our first house. That was pretty amazing.

Five years later I could say that I definitely don't regret our decision to move here. Little by little, I regained most of what I lost. I went back to school. I met new friends and I found a middle point where I can be myself, a Latina woman, but somehow still feel integrated to a new culture, also. I recommend the experience to



anybody. I always invite my American friends to go and see the world.

My dream is that one day I'll be able to speak English without any effort in a more natural way, just like I can speak Spanish. Five years from now I want to be doing just what I've been doing for the last five years...learning new things every single day!

~Gabriela



I come from Canton, South China. I've been in the United States since 1994. My ex-husband sponsored me to come here. We'd never met each other, but we spent two years writing letters and then he wanted to meet me. He came back to China and we got married.

I am so lucky to have a chance to come to United States, to do something that I want to do. Here there is such freedom and independence. As long as you work hard you can change your life. You can change it from the bad to the good. Maybe not really good, but if you don't want to live on the bottom line you can go up by working harder to change it. In China, never. Even if I can change my life, I cannot change my family's life. I come here; I can change my family's life.

I like living here, you know, because of my business. We needed a Thai restaurant here. I wanted to bring something new for the people to enjoy. They say "you're crazy, because you're a Chinese woman opening a Thai restaurant". I always like to gamble. If I don't try it, I won't know. I always believe in myself. If I believe in somebody else, I can never do something I want to do. I still have all my goals. I cannot fail, because I know I have to be independent, because I know my son needs me. I have to work hard so he will have a good future one day. I want my son go to college and get a good education and build his life.

As Chinese, we really face discrimination. That's why we want to work hard. If you feel like you are proud of yourself, no one can discriminate against you. We ask that you give us a chance because this is not our first country, it's our second country, second language, everything. If we try harder, the people will say "that kind of



people really work hard." We want respect.

I feel really comfortable here. Grand Junction is my place. It's so nice and sunny. When I opened my restaurant I met more people. Even my workers...if I wouldn't have opened the restaurant, I wouldn't have met them. They're really good workers. Now I know how to hire people, and the employees have a different attitude. I learned something new. I like it. I love the United States.

~Ya Mei



I'm from Romania. I played the lottery and I won a green card. I came to Grand Junction in June 2007.

I miss my family. It's lonely here if you don't have friends. I have made a couple of friends, but not too many, I don't have time. In Romania when you finish your work you go and meet some friends to drink a beer. Here, I just go home.

The people from Grand Junction are really nice, but I didn't expect to see this small city. In Romania, when you stay home and watch TV, what you see on television from America are big cities like New York, Las Vegas, and Los Angeles...not Grand Junction. It's a quiet city. It's a different size of city, different size of life.

I fix parts for the oil rigs. I work Monday to Friday, so if they don't send me out to the field to the rigs on the weekends, I stay home to speak with my family or watch TV. I usually stay on the computer on messenger to speak with my friends or girlfriend. When I'm alone I mix music, like a DJ, for fun.

Romanians don't have a lot of opportunities like you have here. It's very hard to live over there. You can't find a proper job even if you have a college degree. In Romania if you finish the university you can work at Wal-Mart or something like that. You work and work, but nothing changes. Here if you have a degree you have a lot of opportunity. I'm glad that I am here, but right now I'm not sure what's going to happen.

Actually my father didn't want me to come here because he wanted me to finish my university studies. If I stayed in Romania to finish my school, I would have missed this opportunity



to come here. I'd have to study two more years in Romania. My mother was so happy and glad that I came over here because not so many people from my country come here.

I think I'll go back to school, but first I have to learn the language. It's easier to speak English than to read and write it. I would like to study something about computers or electronics and communication. I think I will stay here until I become a citizen. After five years I have to pass the citizen test. I really want to bring my girlfriend here to see if we can start something here. I want to raise a family in America, but it's very hard being separate. It's hard.

~Bogdan



I am from Djelfa, Algeria. I came to the United States on July 20, 2006. I came here because of my wife. I met her in Tunisia on July 14, 2003 and I married her four days later. She's a kind woman. I love her a lot. You know the story of Romeo and Juliet? She's my Juliet. I make her strong and she makes me strong. My wife is my other half. She is my life.

Grand Junction is a nice city. I like the climate, it's similar to Algeria. There are lovely people here, nice people. It's really easy to find a job here. During my first job interview, the manager, Mike, said "I don't understand you, but I know that you want this job and are a strong man." This job helped me with the language.

When I arrived here, I knew just the words "yes" and "hello". I started taking English classes about one month after I came. Every day I am learning new words. When I came here I didn't know anything about Grand Junction. I want to know everything. My first goal - I want to drive. My English tutor taught me how to drive.

I have a nice family. Now I have three kids. It's easy to me to spend time with the kids. We play frisbee, soccer and chess. Our first goal is to have happiness. We live in a happy house. We see my wife's family almost every day. I hope that everyone will take care of their parents here.

I have a lot of friends from Grand Junction. I also have friends from many different countries that are living here. America is a world. It's a big world. I see a lot of people from other countries. It's nice.



My goal is to open a business with my wife, an Algerian restaurant. It's my goal in 2009. In this country you make your dreams. Here it takes maybe two years to reach your dreams. Life is easier here.

~Belgacem



I'm from Mexico and came to the US when I was twelve years old. My parents brought us so we could have a better opportunity for our future.

All my family is here, my parents, my brothers, my sister, and my three nieces. I like the Grand Valley. A small town, but big enough you can get what you need. Grand Junction's surroundings are the most beautiful scenery that I have ever experienced.

Being in a foreign country has been an enjoyable experience. I have made many friends and learned more about different cultures. Growing up in the ESL program helped me to develop an open mind toward others. I had the opportunity to have many friends from South America, China, Japan, Europe, and other countries. Together as a group we had the determination to learn English and graduate from high school. Nothing brings people closer together than the exquisite delight of ethnic foods and good music.

It can be frustrating not to grasp everything at first. It seemed like I had one obstacle after another, but with the support of my family and my teachers I have learned to trust myself and improve my pronunciation and understanding of English and the American culture.

Right now I'm doing cosmetology because it is what I've always wanted to do as far as I can remember. I think that it is something I can make a career out of. I think it is important to improve your education. You can really be anybody you want in this country. Ultimately my goal will be to graduate with a business degree to run my own salon.



Somebody asked me if I ever want to go back to Mexico. I was like "yeah, I like to go to Mexico to visit, but I couldn't live without the American culture anymore". I feel like I am part of this country and this country is also a part of my life.

~Graciela