

“From Isolation To Community: My Journey At Emory”

By: Khushi Agarwal

Growing up in a collectivistic society like India, every decision I took was influenced by the people around me. The idea of moving to a more individualist society like the US, where everyone seemed so comfortable being on their own, was scary. I knew the transition would come with challenges, but nothing could fully prepare me for what lay ahead.

On my second day at Emory, I found myself standing in a supermarket with endless rows of shelves. Unlike back home, there were no store staff to guide me through the aisles. Instead, there were self-checkout counters that expected me to navigate the technology on my own. Even something as small as trying to find a specific shade of lip gloss felt overwhelming-I had to search through a tablet instead of simply asking someone for help. This seemingly trivial moment made me deeply isolated. I remember calling my mom that evening, tears flowing, ranting about how homesick and alone I felt already. The inner turmoil and confusion from being thrust into such a different environment often led to moments of heartbreak. A significant part of me also resisted the typical American foods-pretzels, bagels, waffles, fries, and cheeseburgers which furthered my isolation. I was initially the girl who hated them. Only to surprise, a couple of weeks later, I found myself complaining when the DCT ran out of bagels early in the morning. It was a small change, one that seemed inconsequential at first, but to me, it symbolized a broader acceptance of my new environment.

Yet, as the days passed, I found solace in unexpected places. I participated in the International Student Welcome events, and the events helped create a sense of community in a setting that initially felt so impersonal. I never imagined that I would meet someone during that week who would become my best friend. It was an unlikely pairing of two individuals from completely different corners of the world, but we bonded over shared experiences of adjusting, learning, and laughing through the challenges. Moments of being acknowledged

were equally powerful. During my first floor meeting, I casually mentioned that I was a certified Kathak trainer, a title I had carried with pride but also assumed would mean little to others in this unfamiliar context. To my surprise, everyone stood up and cheered for me. Another moment that left a mark was during an International Student and Scholar Services event where I won a raffle prize, and the entire hall erupted in cheers. It wasn't about the prize-it was about the community that I created around me.

I eventually learned a very important lesson: individualistic societies are not devoid of community; they simply perceive it differently. The support I once saw back home was reflected here in the friendships I made and in the genuine interest people had in each other's cultures.

Perhaps one of the most surprising experiences came when I attended a Buddhist meditation session randomly one Thursday. What I found, though, was a space of comfort-one where I could simply be, without the pressures of adapting or fitting in. In that quiet room, surrounded by people who, like me, sought some peace amid the noise, I found a profound connection to myself. It became a space I returned to often, a reminder that in the midst of all the change, I still had the power to find my center.

Looking back on these experiences, I've learned that belonging isn't a place; it's a feeling that grows when we connect with others, share our stories, and allow ourselves to be open to the unfamiliar. The friendships I've made, the moments of celebration, the times I found comfort in unexpected places-these are the parts of my Emory experience that I will cherish forever. It's a journey I'm grateful for, and one that has not only shaped my time at Emory but also the person I am becoming.