

Ifeoma Chikelu  
Nigeria  
MPH '18

## **AN AMERICAN EXPERIENCE**

“Need a taxi?” I could not help but notice the silver ring peeking out of his nostrils and the complex of tattoos that pervaded two toned arms as he approached me outside Terminal B of the expansive Philadelphia International Airport. Open-minded as I was, it still was difficult to reconcile this strange ornamental taste with mine. Were he in Lagos, he would be regarded as “possessed by the devil” and fit only for Yaba Psychiatric Hospital. I had stopped worrying about the orientation program that I missed in the wake of more immediate worries: I had no idea where I was; my luggage was to be delivered to my hotel address the next morning and I had no change of clothing; and I was having to repeat myself while speaking in this apparently unfamiliar Nigerian accent and straining to understand what was being said to me in an ‘outrageously fast’ American accent. “Yes, please.” I was relieved that I did not have to repeat the hotel address this time.

Only 22 hours earlier, our US-bound flight from Lagos-Nigeria was making an emergency stop in Frankfurt while I calmed and stroked the back of Rita, the expectant mother who had suddenly developed contractions and had gone into labor during the flight. My medical expertise had come in handy and I was glad to help. The rest of the flight had been uneventful with Rita gone and her seat beside me vacant. I was tired and hungry when we touched down but I lost the courage to buy a drink and snacks at the arrival lounge of the airport after the decent price of \$15 quoted for them became scandalous on conversion to Naira – I would feast for 3 days straight in Lagos with that sum, I thought to myself, as I walked away to the descending escalator. Two hours later, I was on the hotel phone placing an order for Jollof Rice and roasted fish from an African restaurant nearby. The price did not matter anymore, not when hunger pounced on me the way it did. No more currency conversions.

I had finally arrived at “the last bus stop,” as we fondly referred to the United States back home, for a world-class Masters in Public Health (MPH) program at West Chester University. Jetlagged and unable to sleep, I stepped out onto the balcony of my modest hotel room to be dealt with what would be the first of a series of shocks to come: A couple kissing passionately outside the parking lot! Public show of affection was not the norm back home in Nigeria and such scenes garnered quick stares. The second shock came the next day. I was not ready for the reality of a handsome, young man as my Industrial Hygiene class professor after a fellow classmate pointed him out to me! How on earth could he be so jovial and approachable? All of my past professors were elderly men and women with either a patch or mass of grey hair on their knowledge-filled heads who scoffed at ‘stupid’ and ‘unintelligent’ questions posed by their students. Five days later, I would be sitting in the front row of a cozy Room 301 at the Health Science building with five other awesome classmates listening to Dr. Cena introduce us to standard industrial hygiene practices, our first class of the semester.

The racial diversity that greeted me at the airport on arrival would appear again a few weeks later, this time within my circle of friends and classmates at WCU. Now, Gloria’s Kenyan folksongs and dance steps are a delight, and I will do anything to have Keerthi and Shrina’s spicy Chicken Masala; Amy and Rhonda are committed to learning about my Nigerian roots as I am about their Missourian background and Dara leaves us all screaming with laughter at jokes straight from the depths of Cambodia. And I never fail to dazzle them with my ‘swag’, mimicry abilities and culinary expertise. The gift of having a worldview without much travel outside one’s domain is indeed a blessing and together, we make a formidable team. Having to write so many papers, review literature and make presentations very often was somewhat new to me at the start of the semester but with help from my professors, classmates and friends, it is fast becoming fun.

Looking back, I can now make out a pattern of kindness and helpfulness woven into the fabric of American life which I enjoyed from the day I arrived without even noticing. I see it in the taxi driver at the airport who did not take advantage of my naiveté by driving in circles to run the meter high but wanted to know how my flight went and wished me well in my studies; the good-natured lad who lifted four heavy suitcases up a flight of stairs to my hotel room the next morning and would not accept a tip; the countless number of times doors were held open for me by smiling faces; the WCU International Office staff who would happily grant me a make-up orientation session despite their busy schedule rather than leave me to my fate with a bunch of pamphlets, instruction sheets, maps and what not – after all, it was not their fault that I arrived late. I learned that here no one judges you by the way you speak or where you are from or how you think or the views you hold – at least most of the time – and that I have absolutely no right to do so either.

Each time I ponder the eccentricities of the country that is to be my home for the next two years, one word always comes to mind - unique. I must say that I love the individuality of the American, his love for his country and sense of duty. I appreciate his accommodation of immigrants and foreigners, and envy the diversity of the people. However, I am yet to grasp the choice of the Fahrenheit temperature scale, the view of Africa as a country and not a continent, and most importantly, calling football “soccer.”