The background of the entire page is a photograph of a stone bridge over a stream. The trees in the background have yellow and green leaves, suggesting autumn. The water in the stream is calm, reflecting the surrounding foliage. The bridge is made of dark stone and has a simple, rustic design.

# *Voices* of the *Valley*

***Immigrant Stories from Students of  
Chippewa Valley Technical College***

**Vol. 1**



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*We dedicate this book to any immigrant, refugee, asylum seeker or migrant who has bravely journeyed to a new country to build a new life. We wish you peace, opportunity, and belonging.*



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# Acknowledgements

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Lastly, thank you to the CVTC English language instructors James Housworth, Lindsey Himanga, LuAnn Sorenson, Sara Bryan, and Alyssa Hedenstrom for designing the curriculum, teaching it to their classes, editing their student's work, and guiding them along the way. By creating a safe, warm, and welcoming environment, our students' voices can be heard.

# Introduction

---

## **“I have a lot of things to tell.”**

- Edward Gonzalez, CVTC English Learner

Adult English language learner classrooms are uniquely diverse, in that a single class can have young adults, grandparents, academics, factory workers, entrepreneurs, and new parents all learning together in one room or on one Zoom call. Cultures blend, clash, and work around each other as students learn grammar, spelling, and pronunciation. Those of us who are instructors in these programs are blessed to be able to experience firsthand the diversity and complexity that is America. Through this book, we hope to offer a glimpse of who we get to work with every day – immigrants telling their own stories in their own words.

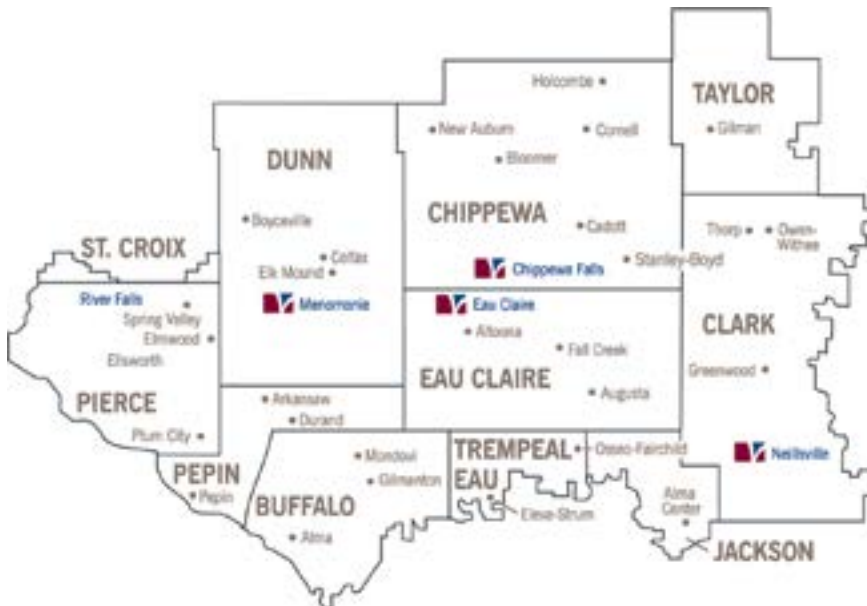
Students in the English Language Learner program at Chippewa Valley Technical College come from all over the world. Some made the journey for economic purposes, others came to be with family, while still more travelled here to find refuge and a new start after war or political conflict made it unsafe to remain where they were. Now, they all work together to learn the language that will help them connect to their new home through classes in River Falls, Menomonie, Eau Claire, and online.

As we began this project, we knew that getting everyone to write a story would be a challenge. Across 3 of our 5 CVTC campuses, we serve over 120 students every term. The program spans all levels, from students who have only been learning English for a couple of months or one year, to students who have lived and worked in Wisconsin for decades. Moreover, while some of our students have completed secondary and even post-secondary educational programs here or in their home countries, others are just beginning their educational journey. As a result, the student population varies widely in academic skills as well as English levels.

Because of all this, we knew it was important to teach the project in a way that helped our students learn about what a narrative is and carefully choose what memories they wanted to share and how. Together, students wrote, revised, and edited their stories with instructor feedback. Instructors edited the stories not for grammatical perfection, but for understanding. Our goal was to lightly edit, in order to keep the works as close to the original voice as possible. In *Voices of the Valley*, we are proud to amplify the voices of 57 of our hard-working students.

As you read, keep in mind the determination it takes to learn a new language, particularly in a new country and culture, out of necessity. This determination is reflected in many of the stories you will read here. We hope you enjoy learning about the sometimes emotional, sometimes scary, but often fun and inspirational memories our students chose to share in this book. As Edward put it, they have a lot of things to tell.

## Chippewa Valley Technical College Counties Served



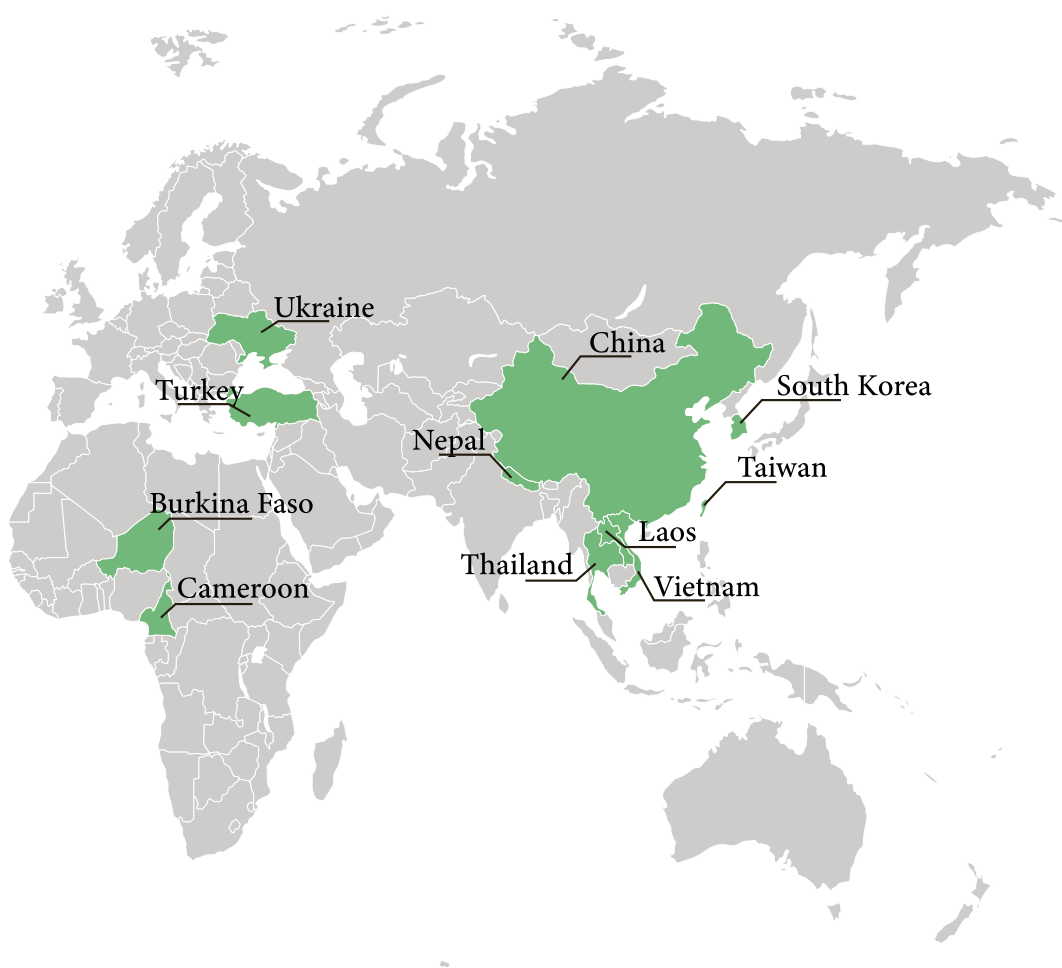
# World Map

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Voices of the Valley  
Storytellers' Native Country





# Angelina Lee

From: Laos

Current City: Menomonie

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My sister sponsored us to come to United States from Laos. My mom, dad, brother – we lived with my sister in her house. So, her family had so many people. We lived together in her house. She and her husband didn't like us. One day, my mom and I got off work and came home. Then, she kicked us out of her house.

That time, my younger sister came to pick us up, we lived with her a couple weeks. We looked for a house for rent but didn't have a house available for that time. I had so many stress going on in my life that time. A couple months later, we got a house for rent; we started over with my family in our new house in Minnesota. I had to work hard to help my mom pay all the bills, and I studied hard for my second language. I took my mom to work, took care of my family for a while. I got married and I moved to live with my husband to a different state. Now, I have four children and I stay home to take care of them and go to school.

My parents still live in Minnesota. So, some weekend when we don't have nothing to do at home, I take my children to visit them in Minnesota.

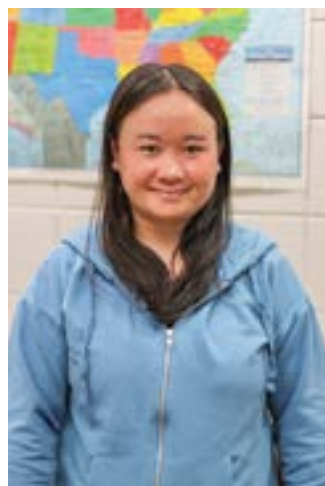
# Bao Yang

From: Laos

Current City: Menomonie

---

I live in Laos. My city is Xieng Khouang. My mother and father had 10 children. I have 7 brothers and 2 sisters. I am the number 7 of 10 children. I did go to school and graduate high school. I had a lot friends but I only had two best friends that we loved each other and we liked to tell about secret in the future, what we want to do on the future. We wanted to come to America. My dream was to come to America because my family was so poor. And I was looking for love from another country and I was so lucky. My sister in law, she had one cousin, he asked for my Facebook then we talked together every time he got home from work. And he very much liked and loved me. I fell in love with him. We talked about come see each other in Laos. When he came to see me in Laos that time is Hmong New Year over America. Almost the day he got back home that time almost Hmong New Year in Laos too. He just came visit me about 3 weeks and spent time with me in Laos.



# Bee Hang

From: Thailand

Current City: Menomonie

---



I was born in Thailand. I was the fourth child in my family. I had three brothers and four sisters including myself then 5. Life in Thailand was difficult, finding food or money was so hard to find. We lived day by day and worked to find food. But the kids didn't know anything because I remember I was like 5-6 years old and playing with friends. I had so much fun with my friends. After a few years, I grew up and I didn't have the chance to play around. I must present myself as a woman and work chores in the household if not I would be punished. I started to help my mom and dad. I worked in the fields to earn some cash to buy food and clothes.

We also had a garden; we planted many varieties of vegetables. The country was poor but we all lived happily with joy. The country was about to close because the Thai government did not want the Hmong to live in anymore, so the UN accepted people to go to the USA. In 2000, my dad passed away and in 2004 my family and I came to the United States. Before we came, we had to leave everything behind and take what we could. When we were on the bus to go to the airport, it was so sad. I was thinking that, "Is this the end, I cry that I have to leave my country behind." Everyone was crying and hurt, they left their country and their families. It was such an emotional moment.

Life changed in the USA, everything I imagined is different from what I thought. It's difficult and I started to learn English like a kindergarten student, but I was 13 years old. It was very embarrassing for old people to learn like kids. I had no friends. After that, middle school, high school, then college was fun. My family moved to Menomonie WI. I moved too after college. I stopped going to college for a couple of years. I decided to go back to college because I felt like I was losing my English. I had a major that I wanted to go to. The ELL teachers are so kind and friendly. They teach slowly so we can learn easily. My life is very busy, I work two jobs, I have two girls, and I go to school. I am happy with my life; I have learned many things even though it's difficult.

# Candido Garfias Medina

From: Mexico

Current City: Menomonie

---

When I was swimming in the river with my daughter Kristell around the mountain, she wanted to swim but she didn't know how; she had to learn. I had to teach my daughter to swim. She swam right into the river and looked at fish of different colors.

After, we ate pizza and drank juice. She and I walked back home.



# Chanda Yang

From: Laos

Current City: Menomonie

---

My saddest memory was when I left my family in Laos to come to America to live with my husband. As I was leaving, I cried because I was leaving my family behind.

When I was on the plane I was scared because it was my first time on the plane. When I got off the plane to get on another plane I almost got lost but luckily a person was kind to show me where to go.

In the end I have reached my final destination and met my husband. As I was hugging my husband, tears were running down my eyes and I was so happy to come to America.





# Cherelyn Maldonado

From: Puerto Rico

Current City: Eau Claire

---

It all started when after a year I came to Wisconsin. I was studying English and I decided to start the search for my first work experience in the United States. It took me a year to prepare and put fear aside to make this decision. At first, I felt like I was ready but inside, anxiety and thoughts of insecurity dominated my mind.

One day I woke up with all the positive vibes and began the search in Indeed, in the local newspaper, flyers everywhere looking for something that would fit as little as I understood English. I looked at everything and everything scared me, even working cleaning somewhere. My nervousness and insecurities stopped that job search just thinking that I could not do a good job. The pressure increased when a relative asked if I had already found a job. I was terrified of answering no because deep inside me I was afraid of failing and not making it. God only knows how much I prayed that He would guide me to get the job that was right for me.

Many months passed and one day I said: it's over! CHERELYN you have everything to get ahead, don't let those thoughts stop you! This morning I got the local paper and saw that Arcadia Middle School needed an EL Paraprofessional... um, what is that I said? And in the requirements, it said that they needed a bilingual person who was fluent in Spanish. I thought, my first language is Spanish, and I speak English... that's where the fear started again... how much English do I need? At this moment I was not going to stop my desire to go and achieve it. And you know what? I prepared for the interview with the help of my husband and my teacher to do my best.

I did my interview, very nervous; I cried while I was answering the questions, and my body did not stop shaking, but that day was the happiest of my life because I achieved what I never thought I could achieve, and although I knew they could choose another person I felt very proud of myself. And yes, the school allowed me to work and to this day I continue to work and give my best in every step I take.

# Chue Thao

From: Laos

Current City: Eau Claire

---

When I was 10 years old, my dad went to the city, Sainyabuli in Laos. He bought me some makeup to wear for New Year's, but I had never used it before so I didn't know how to use it. But I was very happy that he bought it for me. Because we lived in the mountains, we didn't have a store or big mall to shop at. Then my dad helped me put the makeup on my face. My mom and my dad gave me a traditional Hmong dress.



They helped me put on the hat, white dress, and all the pieces. I felt like I was a princess to my parents. They were happy that I was more beautiful than my friends. My friends didn't have new clothes to wear for New Year's, but my parents shared some Hmong clothes with them.

I was happy that my grandmother, my mom's mom in the U.S., sent all Hmong traditional dresses, which came from the U.S.A. That's why I got a lot of Hmong clothes. I was the most beautiful that year. Everyone came to watch me and said, "Wow she's beautiful." They wanted me to be the wife of the village owner's son.

Four years later when I was old enough to get married, I was very nervous that year. But my family moved to the city, in Sainyabuli. My parents said it's good to move because I didn't like the person who wanted to marry me.



# Cristobal Garcia Perez

From: Mexico

Current City: Eau Claire

---

New Year's Day is special for me because it's also my birthday. I moved from Mexico to Wisconsin in March 2022. New Year's Day, January 1, 2023, was my first celebration with family and friends in Wisconsin.

We started with preparing spicy food. We grilled beef steak and made salsa. The salsa had tomatoes, chilies, jalapeños, onion, salt, cilantro, and a little sugar. It was spicy and so good. After everything was prepared, around 11 pm, we put on mariachi music and ate. There were about 20 people eating, laughing, singing, and dancing together. Finally, we ate my favorite dessert, lemon jello. The new year was great that day.

# Daniel Tzompaxtle Maciuxtle

From: Mexico

Current City: Chippewa Falls

---

My first job I had was in a tire recycle. It was great and the manager was a lot of fun.

After a while, work began to decrease and there was not much work. In the end, the boss had the need to start to cut the staff.



# Domingo Salas Tzompaxtle

From: Mexico

Current City: Chippewa Falls

---

Three years ago - I think it was in August, I do not remember very well - we went to a farm.

Me, my son, and my wife got up early that day. We got ready, and when we arrived everything was beautiful. We ate mangoes and we swam in the river. We went for three days. The sound of the birds was the most beautiful and the water. The flavor of the fruits was the most delicious. I felt very happy with my family, and the plants smelled very good. It ended with many mosquito bites, but that trip was very fun.



# Dulce Rodriguez

From: Mexico

Current City: Eau Claire

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## *To My Sister*

I remember the day we noticed it; I remembered it so perfectly that I even remember what we were all wearing. It was February 24th, just two days after your lupus diagnosis; we were sitting in my bed: you, mom and me, you told me to brush your hair and I was so tired that day, but I did it because I knew that would make you happy in a way. I grabbed the brush and I sat down behind you in my bed, I started brushing and all of your hair started coming down with the brush, our mom was looking at me while a hundred tears started falling through my face, I was speechless because I didn't know that would happen that soon. My mom got close to me, grabbed my hand and took the brush off of my other hand. She told me to move so she could brush your hair and I moved. I knew you were starting to worry when you heard my mom saying that to me, I saw your look and how it looked lost and sad; I knew you knew what was happening. Then you opened your mouth and waited 5 seconds and then you said, "Am I going to look ugly with no hair?" I couldn't resist it, I went to the bathroom just so you couldn't see me cry. I promised you I would take care of you, and I just couldn't let you see me cry, I remember how I screamed in silence, wondering why this was happening to you and not me.

When I calmed down, I got up from the floor, wiped my tears off and I opened the door just to see my mom crying in silence behind you with all of your hair by her side. I stood up by her side and she quietly gave me your ball of hair and I took it to the bathroom and I wrapped it in paper just so you wouldn't notice it in the trash can. I wiped off my tears again and I went out of the bathroom, and you asked me "How do you think I'll look with no hair?" I remember telling you, "You are always beautiful, you're more than beautiful and if you look ugly, we'll look ugly together because if you lose your hair, I'll shave my head." I remember you crying and saying, "You're not going to do that, I'm not going to let you do that."

A day after that, our grandma died. I remember you asking me to take you to her funeral just so we could be able to say goodbye to her; you begged me to drive you to her house, to make an 8-hour road-trip, while you were really sick, while you were just processing your diagnosis. I remember we got there and the first thing you wanted to do was shave your head. We were in the bathroom: you, Alma and me, trying to figure how to use the shaving machine. You asked Alma to shave your head and she did. I remember that when she finished you got up and went to the other room, I knew you went there to cry. I sat down in the chair and told Alma to shave my head too and she told me, "I'll shave your head only if you shave mine," and I told her "deal." She shaved my head and you came back and fell to the floor, crying because I had shaved my head. You were crying so much that you were speechless; then I shaved Alma's head and you cried even more. You hugged us and cried even more. We went to our grandma's funeral and everyone started crying as they watched us enter our grandma's house. They all hugged you. I remember how you told me that shaving my head made you feel supported. Sister, I'd shave my head a million times again just so you feel supported.

# Edith Buitrago

From: Colombia

Current City: Menomonie

---



It was a day very special for me and my family. All was prepared for a welcome. From a beautiful room to a sweet sweeter pink color. The room had walls with special colors and in the door a decoration that had the name of Lucía. The day more special for me has been and always it. The birth of Lucía.

On Monday, at 4:00 am, my mother, my sister and me got up and we got ready to go to the clinic. We arrived at the clinic I had a big backpack with everything pink color. We were very excited and we already wanted to know the new baby. The nurse asked me some questions, she prepared me for the surgery. I was very scared and excited many emotions in this moment. At 7:35 am I heard a baby's cry, the doctor told me, "Congratulations for the birth!" In this moment I thought that nothing made me more happy. I wanted to see her soon, to know her and give her many kisses.

The doctor told me that my baby had a weight of 6.5 lbs. and a height of 20.47 in. The nurse dressed my daughter like a princess all pink. They moved from the surgery room to recovery. I was on a stretcher and my daughter was in an incubator. The nurse allowed my mother to see my daughter, she was very happy, it was an awesome moment. She had her granddaughter between her arms, she called her my Lucía. After my sister saw the baby, all the family wanted to know the new member of the family. Lucía had a beautiful face her skin was like a peach all soft. Her cheeks were pink, her brown eyes and a little nose. She had little bit of black hair.

For me, this was the most wonderful thing in my life.

# Edward Gonzalez

From: Mexico

Current City: Menomonie

---

I have a lot of things to tell. I was born in Mexico in Veracruz's state. It's a beautiful place for living. I grew up in a little town called Monte Blanco. I lived there for 20 years. I had a good childhood. We were three brothers and one sister. I said "we were" because my little brother Erik died in January. It was so hard for us. Although still it hurts, we should continue our lives. I have always worked. When I was a child, I was a baker. I started with this job when I was ten years old. I think that I can say it was not easy being a child. I had this job for ten years to support at home, but I could study. It was the most important for me. When I was in high school I did not know what to do with my life, at that time I was not a good student. I had to work, to study, and being a teenager, it was complicated.



I lost a year of high school for irresponsibility, when I finally could finish, I did not know what to study. I started in engineering after I didn't know what to do yet. Finally, I studied food chemistry, however I did not work in that area. I initially started in renewable energies, something too different, but it was the beginning for a big trip I could do to meet new places. I visited all the states in Mexico – 31 states. It's a reward for me. I have reached my goals, but I need more. A random day, a friend told me, "Do you want to work in the United States?" It was two months ago. Well, I'm here now. I'm enjoying this new life and I want to continue, live free and full of happiness!

# Emine Akin Tunali

From: Turkey

Current City: Eau Claire

---



BOOM! Claps of thunder sounded.

It started pouring suddenly while I was driving next to the construction area. I could see almost nothing. It seemed hazardous, especially since the gravel roadway still had not been paved. The pile of sand that had accumulated on the side of the road narrowed the road in a flash, and as soon as I passed it, I realized that I faced a big truck.

I dreaded a huge BAM! on my front side. Even though I reduced my speed, I couldn't avoid head-on collision with the truck. The next thing I saw was probably the scariest slow-motion scene I had ever watched: Upon collision, my car kept moving forward beneath the truck, the hood began to fold, and reached the windshield. The windshield was broken, the seat belt was locked. The myriad of airbags inflated to my side, my head was stuck in the seat, I couldn't breathe for a moment, and then quickly deflated. The car stopped going forward, turned 90 degrees and went backwards, and there was a second crash. I felt a terrible pain in my neck with the impact. I could see the back of the car in the mirror. The car was out of the way and got stuck between two trees. *I'm off the road, there won't be another accident. Am I going to survive? There is almost no hope.* I surrendered to my destiny and did not try to get out of the car as I did not believe in getting rid of it. The roadway was a bit desolate. Fortunately, it was time for people to get home from work.

Someone got me out when I least expected it, abruptly. I saw a stranger looking at me with full compassion. "Are you OK?" his voice trembled. *He seems so scared. I am not alone on the road, I feel a little relieved.* "Yes, I guess," I murmured. I felt the raindrops falling on my face, and I looked at the sky. It seemed gloomy, the scent of soil was felt, and wet people appeared around me. It was buzzing in my ears. Things started to get a little hazy there.

While getting into the ambulance, people caught my eye, someone taking photos of the accident, and the others stared at me wondering how I survived that car accident. While I was answering the ambulance doctor's questions, I was in physical pain. I felt like I couldn't breathe. My heart was beating like it was going to explode. I couldn't keep up with the questions. I'd get distracted. I stared out the window and watched the rain hit the window. I imagined that the ambulance stretcher was a raft and that I was completely lost at sea. Because that was what it felt like.

On the heels of arrival to hospital, tests were done, x-rays were taken, serum was inserted. *The sound of IV drip is similar to the sound of a clock ticking. It calms me down and makes me feel peaceful. However, it is also like I am counting down to the end of my life.* I was in the intensive care unit. Over the next few hours, the room seemed to get larger by the minute, and I was completely alone that excruciating night. I lost track of time. No matter how strong painkillers they gave me, it didn't lessen my pain all night long. I felt a range of emotions including shock, disbelief, fear, and anxiety.

My mother had just gone to another city for a month to visit my grandmother. My mom had high blood pressure. If she had got such news on the phone, it would have been highly likely that her blood pressure would skyrocket. I was afraid it might cause a brain hemorrhage or stroke. For that reason I preferred not to tell her. If she hadn't known, then I would have told it like a trivial thing. But she got the news, she came up a week later, and she was so angry that I had never seen her so angry before. I still couldn't breathe easily. My mom cried while scolding me. *I see that she is disappointed and so upset. I felt like I'd messed up.*

"I want you to promise not to hide anything like this again and to drive much better carefully," she wept. I could feel my eyes welling up with tears. If I had said anything, I couldn't have helped myself and I would have sobbed. So I nodded without saying anything.

I will never forget that car crash. Even though I wasn't a reckless driver, I came face to face with death at a moment I never expected. No one was injured but me. Even the possibility of someone else getting hurt because of me is terrifying. I lost my enthusiasm for driving in that August just before my birthday. I knew I had to put that accident behind me in order to move forward. Nevertheless I have the humbling knowledge that, had I not experienced that accident, I most certainly wouldn't be an altogether safe driver.

Long time later, I understand I have been feeling free since that accident. I'm aware of the importance of every single minute of my life. Is there any guarantee that we won't have a crippling disability or won't die by an unexpected accident? With every passing second, we are getting close to the end. I want all the remaining time from now on to have meaning. When my last breath comes, I don't want to be regretful for the things I did or didn't do.



# Fan Yang

From: China

Current City: Hudson

---

I moved to America in 2006. I felt excited for the different opportunities waiting for me. I first lived in the state of California for a few weeks. After that, I moved to a small town called Ellsworth in the state of Wisconsin. Afterwards, I thought about business and income.

I currently own a business called King House in Ellsworth, WI. During the first few days, I felt very nervous, and the restaurant was full of customers. My team and I were able to organize everything in a smooth way. Back then, I was working everyday without any breaks. Although we were working all the time, we were very happy with the business we opened.

I kept working at King House for 11 years. Then, I decided to open up another restaurant so I didn't work at King House much after that. I felt proud that I finally decided to change things around. My team and I decided to open a Japanese restaurant quite far away from our hometown. Now, I have much more time to myself, but I also work a lot.

# Gomez

From: Mexico

Current City: Eau Claire

---

When I left for the US in March 2011, it was morning and warm. I was young, just 17. I remember waking up early, excited to come, but my mother was sad to see her youngest son go away. She was beautiful, dressed in blue. She didn't say much. She just hugged me and gave me her blessing. But now I understand everything when I remember how she looked at me and cried. She was destroyed inside, thinking that maybe it was the last time we would see each other.

Two days later, I crossed the border. I had promised my family to get out of poverty. As a kid, there was no food. We walked for three nights and two days. The cold nights froze me. We were 20 or more. When I crossed the border, hungry, sometimes I cried. For many, I was an illegal immigrant. For my mom, I was a brave boy.

Little by little I sent money to my parents. Now there is food on the table, but I feel they miss me when I call. This month marks 12 years since the morning that I left home with one great dream. Thank you, Mom. Your blessings worked. I promise I will be back soon to realize my dream of us hugging each other again.

# Graciano (Chano) Salas Tzompaxtle

From: Mexico

Current City: Chippewa Falls

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My siblings, cousins, and I went to Winona. We went to a big mountain. It was a beautiful place I went with my cousins. The mountain was high and had a musty smell. I didn't like the sound of the cars, but the sound of the wind is nice. I had peace of mind. I was excited and happy.

We saw the beautiful mountain. It was very tall and had snow at the top. We were very happy. It was a very good day.



# Hilario Salas Itehua

From: Mexico

Current City: Chippewa Falls

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First, I was driving with my friend to Menomonie. Second, we were enjoying the beautiful landscape. Last, it was fun. We looked at the landscape with music when we were driving. It was very relaxing and we were very happy. We talked while I was drinking a delicious coffee. And it smelled like cookies.

# Hye Min Park

From: South Korea

Current City: Menomonie

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When I was 13 years old, my mom sent me to the English academy in Korea. But I said to mom that I couldn't go there after I went there for the first time. Because I was scared about taking the elevator and I felt like I was alone in an unfamiliar environment, which made me afraid.

I was afraid of everything and I thought I was weak at that time. Nevertheless, before I knew it, I became a high school student and got my first part-time job. And after graduating from college, I got a job.

If you think about it, the beginning of everything was difficult. But in the end I made it. Even so, in fact, I was afraid to come to America. Everyone was worried about me. Also I thought I can't live here well without family. Unexpectedly, I'm doing well now. I went to school, I got a part-time job, and I made good friends. At last I realized that the things I worry about don't happen and I can do anything if I believe in myself.

I am growing through these experiences. In my opinion, there is nothing you can gain without experiencing it. Most of all, thank you to my husband who believed in me.



# Jane Lin

From: Taiwan

Current City: River Falls

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In Taiwan, usually most high school students are not allowed to have boyfriends or girlfriends. So when I went to college, I was thinking about what would my Mr. Right look like? Where is Mr. Right?

One day, I stood at the college entrance of the National Taiwan University of Science and Technology (NTUST). I wished that I could have a boyfriend that graduated from this college. And, he must be taller than 6 feet, look cute, enjoy doing sports constantly, and has good computer abilities.

That was the day I started working at a hotel. A young man approached me with a smile. He was 6 feet tall



and had long hair. He talked to me. He said he would show me how to access the staff cafeteria. He did a good job and we had lunch together. We had a nice talk. He said he was studying at NTUST and majoring in computer science. He was on the swimming team and he liked sports. “Ha, ha, ha,” I thought. “Is this Mr. Right?”

We started dating. We went to swimming pools a lot. I learned to swim from him. We went to night markets where I enjoyed ordering a lot of food that I couldn’t eat at all... he helped me finish it. He was a big part in me passing my computer class. Five years into our relationship, we decided to get married.

I’m really grateful that Sting stayed with me. 28 years is a long time to be together, and it is not always easy. We decided to send our children to study in the USA during COVID-19. After that, we all moved to the States. It was a significant challenge.

We have changed a lot. Even in terms of language, we must learn a new one, and look for a new career. We have walked out of our comfort zone. To get through this challenging time, we continue to support and love each other more. Thank you for everything you have done for me Sting. I hope we can be happy for another 28 years. I love you.

## Jose (Yahir) Sanchez Montalvo

From: Mexico

Current City: Chippewa Falls

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I visited my friends in Minnesota. I saw that my friends were tired. So we went for a walk. We saw the park and went cycling. It was exciting. We finished very tired and hungry, but very good.



# Juan Cruz

From: Mexico

Current City: Durand

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“Would you like to work in the United States?”

This question was a big surprise! It came from a veterinarian who had worked in the U.S. but then moved to Mexico to work for that same company. It was 2016. At that time I was doing my professional internship at a dairy farm in Mexico. A fellow veterinarian saw that I had the attitude of a hard worker and that I really knew how to solve the problems that came up in our work with the animals.

That's when he asked me the question about working in the United States. I told him I would like to but I haven't finished college yet and I still need to do my thesis to process my professional degree. He answered, “When you're done, talk to me.”

So I continued studying and doing my professional internship. When I graduated, the dairy where I did my professional internship offered me a position and I accepted it while my documents were pending. In this dairy I worked for two years as a breeder. In this job I was in charge of 300 animals, tending the first 90 days of the life of each calf. At the same time, I was the right-hand man of the person who was in charge of dairy herd reproduction: that's how I put my university knowledge into practice.

After the two years were up, I spoke to my vet partner and asked him if there were still vacancies to work in the United States and he answered, “Yes. There is a vacancy for Wisconsin.”

I responded, “I'm interested!”

He replied, “You'll need a week of training to learn the techniques that are used here in the United States.” So he directed me to the training and I completed it.

At the same time, I was applying for a work permit in the United States. Things happened quickly after that. A visit to the American consulate. A flight to the United States. A co-worker picking me up at the airport. Getting a social security card and going to the bank for a credit card. After that they gave me 15 days of training on the route I would be working on. Then they let me work alone. That's how I got to Wisconsin.

# Keum Hee (Rosa) Choi

From: South Korea

Current City: Menomonie

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When I was four years old, my family lived in Seoul. Mom, dad, older sister, younger brother, and me. Mom was pregnant. Relatives lived in my neighborhood.

In Korea, there is a concept to shared parenting, so we used to eat our snacks together at any house while playing. We also used to go to the old palace as a group or go to an amusement park.



To celebrate Children's Day on May 5th, we decided to go on a group trip to Namsam (Nam: South; Sam: Mountain), a very famous mountain in Korea, in the middle of the city and packed a lunch. On that day, many people were crowded because celebrities performed at an outdoor concert hall. I was playing in the water at a fountain because the heat started early that day in those years. At the beginning of the show, we had to move to a different spot, but I insisted that I would stay here and play. After playing for a long time, I suddenly realized, "Where is my mom?" and searched endlessly to find my family.

A middle school student passing by took me to the police station. I was crying, and they asked me this and that, and all I remember was my age, my name, and my father's name. My relatives used to say that I was smarter than my peers, that I knew my address, home phone number, and neighborhood where I lived, but I was in shock and couldn't remember at the moment. I was sent to a lost child shelter, where I spent the day. The next day, my mom came running to me crying, with her heavy, pendulous abdomen due to the later weeks of pregnancy. I was lucky, to think about it now. It was a time when there were often cases of illegal adoption abroad, even though there were parents.

My mom said, "Let's go home," but I wasn't going to go home; I liked it there. The shelter was a very luxurious house; the snacks and rides were excellent, and the caretaker was very kind. Actually, I have "second-daughter syndrome." I have a self-reliant personality that is not noticed by anyone.

Since then, neighbors have sometimes made fun of Namsam's daughter, for him losing his daughter in Namsam, because my father's name is the same as the place we went to!

When I see abandoned children meeting their parents on television, I guess I am destined to live in the US. When I think about my experience and how I might have been living another life somewhere here in the US, especially life in Minnesota and Wisconsin. Wisconsin is one of the states that accommodated many orphans from Korea.

# Khamla Lee

From: Laos

Current City: Eau Claire

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My husband and I wanted our children to see lots of different famous places in the United States. Our best family vacation was Canyonland National Park. At that time, our children enjoyed the trip very much, and we had a lot of fun in that place, because they have many kinds of activities. You can hike, bike and run along Canyonlands National Park, either on the top or at the bottom. Canyonlands National park is huge and a very beautiful place.

When I sat on the cliff of the canyon, I saw a very deep valley. When the helicopter flew down, it was tiny. The cliffs were many shades of brown. We had never seen anything like that before. Our children told my husband and I they were very lucky they had opportunity to go. There are many popular places in the United States to visit, and we thank God for His blessing.

# Kurmat Duschonov

From: Ukraine

Current City: Menomonie

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I and my wife went by car to a beach in Ukraine. The name was Kyrylivka. In the summer to swim, the sea it was hot on 5 of August 2020. I saw beach umbrellas and was so happy.

# L

From: Mexico

Current City: Chippewa Falls

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First, we went to Tamaulipas. Second, there was a very large river. It was very dangerous. I felt very nervous. There was no sound. Everything was silent. I smelled danger. Finally, I was able to cross the river safely.

# Leo Salas Tzompaxtle

From: Mexico

Current City: Chippewa Falls

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My brothers and I went to Winona, MN. We went to drive to the mountain. We saw beautiful rivers frozen and much snow and the city. When we were up the mountain I could see all the places and rivers. We heard the sound of the wind. It was something incredible. When we were there we were feeling very happy because we never saw something like that. We were very happy because we never saw the good place like that.



# Maria Lastrì

From: Mexico

Current City: Menomonie

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I am Maria, a woman that all my life I have fought. I am the 3rd of 9 siblings. My mom worked very hard, but with a lot of poverty. I was born in Mexico and married at 19 with a person who was a toxic coward. My first son was born. When I was 23, my mom died and my brothers were very little and I had to take care of them. At 26, my 2nd son was born. In 1994 I separated from my husband and I came to the USA.

I had 2 children and was pregnant 5 months. I lived in Oregon with my sister. My daughter was born December 15. I came to this country without a job. After 9 months, I was already living alone and now I studied the GED. I had 2 jobs. My daughter was 4 years old when I met the man who is now my husband. After 2 years we started living together in December 1999 and my daughter Isabel was born in 2001.

In 2003, we began a dairy business. For 18 years, he had worked very hard and in 2017 the business was sold. My husband was not ready for retirement, so he investigated for a new job. On November 5, 2021, we went out from Oregon in a 34-hour drive to Wisconsin with two children, 3 dogs, and 7 cats.

I give grace to God for the life You gave me, that my children have a different life with opportunities that make it safe for them and my grandchildren. I am a very happy, very strong grandmother. Thank God.



# Mary Suarez Flores

From: Mexico

Current City: Eau Claire

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It had been a week since the Chichonal Volcano, located three hours from where we lived, had erupted. It was still Tuesday April 4, 1982. I was 12 years old. My family and I lived in Pueblo Nuevo Solistahuacan, Chiapas, Mexico. During that whole week, refugees were arriving in our town. On the morning of April 4, my sisters and I were getting ready to go downtown and see the people who had arrived and be able to help with something.



But as the day progressed, we noticed something queer. The sun did not rise and it was getting darker. When it was 12 noon, the day began to get darker. So my mom went looking for us and she gave us the news that the volcano had erupted again and now it had been stronger than the first. She said it was dark because there was a layer of sand and ash covering the sky. It started to rain sand and ash. We returned to the house and the street was dark, as if it were midnight. We arrived at the house and the kitchen roof, which was made of tin, had collapsed, as the roofs of many other houses had done. Then an uncle who lived 30 minutes away arrived from the area closer to the volcano. He said that they were fleeing because the volcano had erupted again, and that there was increasing risk. My uncle said we should run away.

We left in the green Volkswagen we had. I only remember taking my two cats, Minina and Kiri. We began to travel. It was raining sand and ash. When we had advanced about an hour or less, the car stopped. My dad checked it and said it wouldn't work because the hoses were clogged with sand. I remember that when we got out of the car my cats got out and Kiri ran away and we didn't find him anymore. It took us a while without receiving help because all the people went with their cars full and loaded with some things.

Suddenly, a van carrying students from a school passed by. They knew us because my mom worked there. They took us with them and the car stopped there. We arrived in Tuxtla Gutiérrez, the capital of Chiapas. We were all covered in ash. We looked like ghosts. I remember seeing the television cameras recording the news.

Two hours later we advanced to a city called Villaflores Chiapas. There we were received by the family of one of the students. We were with them for two months, more than 30 people in one house; they gave us food and shelter. My parents really liked that city and they said that I could find work there. We decided to stay and lived there for three years.

My dad returned to Pueblo Nuevo for the furniture. Villaflores is a place that brings back fond memories, we met very kind people.

# Nadiia Kolosova

From: Ukraine

Current City: Altoona

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This story happened about 10 years ago...

It was supposed to be the journey of a lifetime, but for my friend Natasha and me, it quickly turned into a series of misadventures. We were both new to long-distance travel, but we decided to get to New York from Rockford, Illinois. My husband carefully planned the route for us on a paper map, and we set off with high spirits. We sang along to the radio and took turns getting behind the wheel, feeling like real road warriors. And, when we passed the bridge, on which we were met by “Welcome to Indiana,” we joyfully shouted, “Hooray!”

And we made the fateful decision to stop for coffee at a roadside cafe and celebrate our new fortune along the way. Little did we know that this innocent detour would lead us down a path of confusion and chaos and several hours of circling around an “unfamiliar” city. We must have taken a wrong turn somewhere, because, without having time to recover, we got lost on the streets of an unfamiliar city, but I had a suspicion that this city was familiar to me. “Are we in Indiana or Illinois?” I asked Natasha, who shrugged her shoulders and said, “Who knows? All these cities seem the same to me!”

Finally, we pulled up to a gas station and decided to ask for directions. Natasha went up to the kind gentleman and asked: “Excuse me, but what kind of city is this?” The man looked at her incredulously and said, “This is Chicago, ladies.” We both laughed at our own stupidity. How could we get so lost? But we didn’t let that ruin our trip. We continued on our way, navigating the highway with newfound confidence thanks to our fun detour in the Windy City.

Looking back on that trip, I can’t help but smile. It was a real adventure full of surprises and laughter. And if you think about it, it all started with a simple cup of coffee.

# Nattaya Fenner-Pimpol

From: Thailand

Current City: Menomonie

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I am from Thailand, born in a small town called Sri Thep, in a province called Phetchabun. I was married for 2 years. After that we moved to Pattaya in the south of Thailand. After we got to Pattaya I got a job working for a company called Yakult. My job was taking products to shops on a motorcycle every morning. I was working like this for about a month after the training was completed and during that time it was near the New Year. We had a dance practice to show our team. Normally, there was nothing to worry about. I practiced dancing. We practiced after work.



Later I felt exhausted and tired. I couldn't eat my favorite food, I felt like I had morning sickness, but that feeling was contradictory because my doctors had told me I couldn't get pregnant. I had a 5-10% chance. But my friend said that I should go to see the doctor again. It appeared that my doctor told me I was pregnant. I argued with my doctor to check again, my doctor laughed and told me, "Congratulations, 100% pregnant."

At this time, my life had to change. I told my husband I couldn't work like this. I had to go back to stay with my parents at Phetchabun because I didn't want to be a burden. When I was back to Phechabun, I went to see my doctor for a check up every month. My doctor said that my body was normal, but for myself, I felt that it was not a usual pregnancy. At that time, I changed the hospital and went to another place away from my village. I told my doctor that I needed special care but I had to pay more money!

I remember June 25th, 1995. It was midnight that the amniotic fluid had broken, but I waited until the morning. That morning my mother went to sell food at the market near her house. When she put everything away, I told my mom I had a stomach ache like I was about to give birth!! My mother reassured me that it was okay, it might hurt. My family took me to the hospital about 10 a.m, June 26th, 1995. I went to the waiting room. I waited until 6:00 p.m because my baby refused to turn. My doctor said it was necessary to cut the child out, because otherwise the baby and I would die. My doctor asked me if anyone was with me and had to sign a document accepting this operation. I told my parents to wait outside because my husband hadn't arrived yet. The doctor asked my parents to sign the document. In that amount of time, the nurse helped me to clean up and take me to the operating room. I didn't know how long it would take because I was asleep before I got to the room.

When I woke up, I didn't realize something was stuck in my throat and I tried to pull it out. I thought, "I'm going to die!" And at that moment I heard someone say to take out the oxygen because I had recovered. The nurse led me to another room. At that time I was drowsy, but my ears could hear my mother's voice. The nurse took me to the bed and I fell asleep again. She brought my baby boy to me. I opened my eyes and saw my baby boy. God sent

me a wonderful thing in my life. I smiled with tears. They told me to breastfeed my baby. The problem arose because the baby refused to drink breast milk, so the nurse had to make formula for the baby to drink.

After my son was born, my husband came and we returned to Pattaya. My son was 2 months old when I realized that my husband had an affair. So I asked for a divorce. I worked hard to make money. I went to work in Bangkok. When I had a day off I went to see my son who lived with my mother. Sometimes it took 3 hours to travel on the bus. I did this for 9 years. Then I decided to open my own beauty salon in Phuket. and fortunately I met my current husband. He is an American citizen. After 1 month getting to know each other, he proposed to me. My husband did paperwork for me to come to America on March 21st, 2005. At that time, we did not bring my son with me because I was afraid he could not stay. 2 years later my husband did new documents for my son to come to America. On July 6, 2007 he came to America!

When I came here, I also wanted to learn English. I was working, and at that time my English was not so good. I went to study at CVTC in Menomonie, Wisconsin. My son went to Menomonie Middle School at that time. Now my son is an American citizen and he's an American Navy sailor, stationed in Japan. I'm so thankful to my wonderful husband for everything. You make me and my son happy!

# Neng Vang

From: Thailand

Current City: Menomonie

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My name is Neng Vang. I am from Thailand. I was born in 1981 and raised in the Bam Vinai Refugee Camp in Thailand with a family of six people. My mother took care of me and my older brother and sister without my father, because my father had passed away before I was born. When we lived in the Bam Vinai Refugee Camp in Thailand. We did not have any land to grow food, so we waited for the United Nations to provide food, and we lived in the camp from 1979 until the camp had closed in 1991. I lived in the camp until I was ten years old.



When I was about five years old, I attended school. The languages that I learned at school in the Bau Vinai Camp were Laotian and Thai. My mom told me that when I was around three or four years old that she registered to come to the United States, but my mom said that my grandma would not let her go to the United States. Then my mom went to cancel the registration to come to the United States. We continued to stay in the Bau Vinai Camp for many years until I was about nine or ten years old. Then, in 1991 the Thai government planned to close the refugee camp.

The Thai government transferred my family and other people to live in the Napole Camp in 1991. We lived there for about three years. My sister had forms to give to my family that will get us to the United States, but my brother did not want to come. We stayed at the Napole Camp for two more years. My brother registered to go to Laos, and my older sister moved to our camp. She told my brother that we should not go to Laos. Instead, she wanted us to go to Thakabao. We arrived at Thakabao in 1995, and I went to school outside there. I studied Thai and played soccer, volleyball, takrow and badminton. I studied at school until sixth grade then at an adult school until 2000. I met my wife in Thakabao and married her. I had two children with her. In 2003, we received the chance to go to the United States. After being interviewed by the United Nation Immigration Office, we passed and move to the U.S.A in 2004.

I lived in Menomonie and studied at CVTC for three months. It is at Menomonie that my wife and I had 2 more children. The government required me to work and volunteer. After that, I applied to Walmart and got the job in 2005. Because I worked full-time and all night, I could not attend school anymore. In 2007, my family and I moved to Elk Mound where we had 3 more children. I continued to work at Walmart until 2020, then quit because I got another job closer to my home. To this day, my family and I still live at Elk Mound.

# Noel Espejo

From: Mexico

Current City: Menomonie

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**“Success is something that is carried within, and to achieve it we must start by making a change in ourselves.”**

From a very young age I have found the diversity of cultures and languages that exist in the world fascinating. English, without a doubt, has been the one that has captured my interest the most, so from a very young age I longed to learn the language to be able to set myself new challenges in my life and fight to achieve them and that part of the result would make me feel satisfied, proud of myself and thus find both personal and professional opportunities.



At the age of nine I began to learn English and that is how my challenge began.

In 2016, I graduated from college and fortunately it was not so difficult for me to get a job in my country but I must say that the idea of getting a job from what I studied in another country was still in my mind; and I did not discard this idea until I achieved it.

At the beginning of 2021, I started looking for vacancies in food companies in the United States and in the middle of this year I got a job, an opportunity that I did not think twice about taking. Although I must admit that I had mixed emotions; I felt very excited that finally I was achieving something that I had longed for since I was very little, but I was also very afraid that all this was something false. At that moment I began the documentation process to be able to legally enter another country. It was when I said “Noel, you are achieving what you have longed for so much, I only hope that you are prepared to face what is coming” and that was where a great war began in my mind.

Until that moment, I had not stopped to think that moving to another country meant living away from family. Although I am single, I am the youngest son of six siblings and the only one who lived with my parents, in addition to other challenges that I would be facing.

Currently I have almost two years since I started this great experience of having moved to another country in search of new challenges, experiences and a new culture, and I must say that it has not been easy at all. I have had to face many adversities in the language and culture but without a doubt some have been an experience that I so longed to live and I feel very happy to have achieved.

I know that I still do not have everything that I have longed to have in my life to feel one hundred percent satisfied, but I have learned that in life everything is a balance and that everything can be achieved with effort and dedication. I have learned to live away from my

parents and I have become a more emotionally independent person and although I will always need them, I know that I can now fend for myself.

I am aware that my ability in the English language is still not perfect, but I am completely sure that I am on the perfect path, since part of all this experience has been meeting very good people who have helped me achieve part of my goals as they are the teachers of CVTC. I feel very grateful to God, to my family and friends who have always supported me and encouraged me at all times. I know that achieving your goals is difficult, but it is more difficult to see how life goes by without working to achieve them.

## Oleksandr Kostiuchenko

From: Ukraine

Current City: Eau Claire

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My way to America started when my mom decided to get married and move to another country. So she was looking for her new love everywhere. She found a good man from Wisconsin in a small city in the U.S. And when he visited her in Ukraine, they fell in love. So a little later he came to Ukraine again to get married to her. When she left Kiev to go to America it was very exciting and very sad for us. My sister and I were left alone. We missed her a lot.

We wanted to live together with our mom. So she helped with the documents. I waited 6 years for my visa. Finally, I moved to Wisconsin in December 2020 before Christmas. It was my first Christmas in a new and different country. Wisconsin has more snow and is colder than Ukraine on Christmas and winter time. Christmas is a special holiday in America, I have seen it in movies. Then when I came here, I saw it myself. It was so beautiful. There were many Christmas lights everywhere.

I arrived in the U.S. without any English. My mom helped me to understand people and talk to them. So I started my new life here, on a new page; a new life, culture, and language. Everything is different and new. After a while, I got my first job, but I still did not speak English at all when I started working there. It was not convenient and it was scary for me. I didn't understand what people told me. A little later, I went to school to learn English to understand more what people say and I still continue to learn English. I will probably learn it for the rest of my life. I like to live in the U.S. I hope I will get a better life here and will build my own family.



# Olena Bondarenko

From: Ukraine

Current City: Eau Claire

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On February 24, 2022, Ukraine woke up from a bomb explosion. I felt fear. It started a war. Russian troops entered the territory of Ukraine in the north and east. Within three days, a third of the territory of Ukraine was occupied and Russian tanks entered on streets of Kyiv, the capital of my country. I felt hopeless.

Immediately after the start of the war, a mass evacuation of civilians to other European countries started. There were thousands of people: children, older people, and families walking across the border. Now 4 million Ukrainian citizens live outside the country. I first went to Bulgaria where I lived for 3 months and then came to Wisconsin to be with my daughter. It is difficult for me to live in a foreign country. The language is different. The food tastes strange and is different from in Ukraine. I miss Ukraine very much.

In the second year, the war is still going on. Many soldiers have died at the front, many civilians have died under the ruins of houses and missile strikes, but part of the country's territory is still strong. The entire world is helping Ukraine in this war. I believe that peace will come soon, and I will go back to my country.



# Olga Kostiuchenko

From: Ukraine

Current City: Eau Claire

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I lived In Ukraine before I came to the USA. My trip started when I got my document from U.S. embassy. It was October 2021. When I finally received my approved document from U.S. embassy, I was full of joy and happiness. Finally, I will be with my brother and mother. I had been waiting for this time for 5 long years. Thank you to my family for supporting me. I believed God made this day, and this opportunity.



When my document for my trip was ready, my family came to Ukraine. We decided to celebrate New Year's in Ukraine with our friends. We had a New Year's party. It was a fun time. We were dancing a lot and playing games. Everybody who came brought food. We were celebrating the New Year all night until 6am. The next day after New Year's party, we rested and stayed in our friend's apartment. The next month we started packing what I wanted to take with me. I had to decide what I could take because in the airplane I could only take one free suitcase. All month before my trip I was spending time with my friends. We knew we would not see each other probably for years. Nobody realized that the war would soon come in Ukraine.

When it was time to fly to America I had never flown for a long distance, to the other side of the earth. I was wondering about my new country, full of joy, happiness, and nervous at the same time. When we arrived to Chicago, first I was very tired because I didn't sleep and time zone changed. I was very tired, but the airport in Chicago seemed very huge. Thankfully, I was with my family who helped me. Then we boarded the plane to fly to Minneapolis. We finally arrived to Minneapolis. I was very tired and sleepy. It was night and freezing outside. I realized that here in Wisconsin there is more snow than in the city where I lived. I am used to cold and snow, but it was unexpectedly freezing, so my first feelings here was it's much colder than I am used to. But I am grateful to God and my family that I can live close to my family and have many blessings. I will see many interesting places in the future.

# Orlando Tzompaxtle Maciuxtle

From: Mexico

Current City: Chippewa Falls

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First, I went to Marshfield to visit my cousins. I noticed that they were tired because they work long hours in the factory. Second, I went with my wife and drove for 2 hours because there was still snow on the road. My cousin prepared some ribs on the barbecue. The food was delicious, and everything was very nice. Last, it was a fun visit.



## Osiris Soto

From: Mexico

Current City: Eau Claire

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A few years ago the life of my family changed completely.

When my husband and I bought our house, my girls Josie and Allie were not so happy because they had left their friends from their other school. They were also sad all the time because their dad had to go out of town to work.

Every time he said goodbye they cried, Daddy, don't go, when are we going to see you again? That question broke my heart. After a while, a friend of mine had an idea. Maybe if I gave the girls the option of having a pet at home, it would help them not miss their father so much.

I exclaimed, "A pet!! No, I can't! I don't like living with animals, I'm very allergic and I couldn't!!" But my love for my girls was so much that I decided to adopt a cat. I still remember the happy face of my little ones when they saw their new pet for the first time.

Ufff, it was the worst year of my life. With my allergy, I couldn't breathe because I was congested all the time. But. The happiness of my daughters was greater than my torment because of that cat. It really was like therapy for the girls. Now that is in the past, my allergy has improved and goodbyes are no longer difficult and sad. With my cat I discovered that he can feel my mood and it relaxes me a lot to have him by my side. This was the best decision of my life to open the doors of our home to Herbie-boy, our kitten.



# Oumou Tangara

From: Burkina Faso

Current City: Eau Claire

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Sixteen years ago, in Burkina Faso, I was at work when my little brother called me to come into the city of Bobo because my mother had stopped eating. After a 5-hour drive, I arrived at my mother's house where she was sleeping. This would be my last visit with her.

She was 87 years old; she often felt it. She was fair skinned with tattooed black lips. That day she was wearing a multicolored dress. She was more beautiful than ever. Suddenly she moved her mouth and opened her eyes. She looked at me and closed them. For me, she was sleeping. She lay peacefully in my arms and closed her eyes. My other brothers and sisters arrived; it was difficult to console each other this moment of pain.

My mother was generous, and she liked to share. She treated all the children the same way and we all ate from the same dish at mealtimes. People came from everywhere for three days after her death for her funeral, which comforted me. Here and there the young people said, "Where am I going to eat? Where am I going to have rice or millet? Where will I get soap? The people said, "Haoua, why did you leave us? May God open the door of paradise for you."

It was unbearable, sad and despair for me to see my mother die in my arms. I did not believe it; my heart broke with anger. She slept for good. We dressed her in white and accompanied her to her last home.



# Phengsy Yang

From: Laos

Current City: Menomonie

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My name is Phengsy. I am from Laos, and I am Hmong. I was a truck driver when I was back home in Laos. I started learning how to drive trucks when I was 19 years old. This is how I supported my family with little education I knew and being poor. My goal in the United States is to learn English and to be a truck driver so I can support my family.



# Phuong Scott

From: Vietnam

Current City: River Falls

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On that day, a beautiful sunny morning I visited my cousin, her name's Lan at her house. I met Lan's friends and other cousin who is Lan's younger sister. My cousin asked us: "We should go to my friend's house and pick up some fruits. There are a lot of delicious mangos, the skin is shiny on the outside, the inside is bright yellow, the mango flesh is sweet and fragrant".

After we heard Lan say that, we were very excited and left immediately. On the way we came across a group of people. There were about five girls including Thanh who my cousin didn't like. Thanh was my cousin's neighbor, I recognized her because I've met her before but I didn't know other girls. They talked and laughed together in excitement about something. But I suddenly saw that my cousin wasn't happy. I felt a bit confused because I didn't know why my cousin wasn't happy when saw Thanh. I passed Thanh I could smell her perfume emanating from her body and I knew she was a rich girl. Thanh stepped to my cousin and talked about something, then I saw their faces look like they were angry and arguing with each other. *Maybe Thanh is trying to hinder us from going to my cousin's friend's house. She says some bad things to my cousin*, I thought.

"What's wrong with you, Lan?" I asked. "I don't like Thanh," my cousin replied. "She's so bossy and sassy. She's never a nice girl to me. She don't let me go to my friend's house now."

And that's why my cousin asked me to fight her. I knew how she was before so I didn't hesitate to agree with my cousin even though I was smaller than her. Me, my cousins and my cousin's friends were a group. Thanh and four other girls were a group. Our two groups stood facing each other. My cousin also turned to ask Thanh: "Do you want to fight with my cousin?"

"I'm not afraid, let's fight," Thanh replied. I saw her eyes that wanted to challenge me. Right after that, I quickly walked over to her. I closed my eyes and my hands formed a fist. I felt I was a boxer for fast attacking. I tore her shirt. She cried. My cousin pulled me towards her. I and Thanh stopped fighting. I saw Thanh was angry with us and still crying.

Then soon my brother came and saw that. He told me "I will tell this story to Mom and Dad". I started to feel worried. My cousin reassured my brother, she said "Both of them are fine, no one get hurt, don't tell them". I also told my brother "Please don't tell Mom and Dad, I will never do this again". After a moment of silence, my brother said, "Okay, I won't tell them". I felt less anxious. Then Thanh also changed her attitude, she had been mean and was now nice to my cousin.

Our group continued to go to my cousin's friend's house to pick mangoes. After we got there we were very excited with the mango tree which was huge and had many fruits. So we were free to pick and enjoy them.

# Raquel (Abby) Caballero

From: Mexico

Current City: Menomonie

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Last week my husband and I went to visit my sister-in-law, one of my husband's sisters. She told me that they had a present for me, so she and my husband, they gave away a beautiful puppy, and we named her Honey. We were very happy to have another member in our little family!

# Reyna Pérez

From: Mexico

Current City: Eau Claire

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Here is a note to remind you how much I miss you...

The last time I heard your voice was on a December afternoon when the phone rang. My mother and I were beginning preparations to celebrate my fifteenth birthday. You sounded very happy to be visiting your mother's hometown; we talked for hours as was our custom.

I remember your exact words when we said goodbye. I said, "Goodbye, Uncle." You responded, "Only say goodbye when I die because that day I will not be able to see you again, and even so will take care of you from heaven. Today, just tell me – see you soon."

I was filled with a strange sensation, as if I was being prepared for your departure. You were more than an uncle. You were the brother, the father and the accomplice that life gave me. And yes... that December 31st day arrived, the most difficult date for 10 years.

I went to visit my grandparents like every year hoping to see you. But, that day you weren't there. That wasn't too strange because I understood that you had a new family: a wife and your two babies. We were happy because seeing you grow and fulfill your dreams always made us very happy. And we knew that the next day you would be there, at the grandparents' house, because you would never miss a pozole from Grandma Marce.

January 1 at 5:00 a.m. I heard my desperate grandfather knocking on the door of my house. At 5:00am I still didn't know if I was awake or was still in a horrible nightmare. I heard him say, "Antonio didn't come home. We looked for him all night and we couldn't find him, he just went out to buy tacos and didn't come back..." In that moment everything was happening very fast, but at the same time, everything was like it was in slow motion.



There were many people in the house. Some people cried and I did not understand why...

Mom took my hands, sat me on the edge of the bed and told me the words I never thought I would hear. Not because I didn't understand the cycle of life, but because you were the person I would have wanted to see grow old day by day. Together with the family as before.

Today I am 27 years old and I still do not understand how a stranger can have the courage to take the life of a person who mistakenly crossed his path, who only went to buy tacos for his family and was there at the wrong time. Not only did it stop your heartbeat, it took the lives of all of us who love you, it took away our desire to move on, it put our whole lives on pause and left us with a pain that after 10 years is the same or still worse.

Now I know that I have an angel watching over me from heaven, who never leaves me alone and when life gets difficult I always turn to you. Someone told me that heaven exists, and I hope so because it is the only hope I have of seeing you again and hugging you...

And then I can say... This is not goodbye but see you soon because I will see you in heaven.

## Romina Vásquez

From: El Salvador

Current City: Pepin

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My name is Romina Gómez de Vasquez, I am 32 years old and I am originally from El Salvador. My husband's name is Paolo Vasquez, we have been married for 10 years. We have two daughters; Mariana Vasquez is 7 years old and Maricela is 20 months old.

In my country I studied nursing. And here in the USA I obtained my Local Pastor License. I would love to get my nursing license from the USA, so I need to learn English very well to pass the exam.

My favorite hobbies are going out with the family and going to eat at restaurants, I like to cook, I also like to exercise, I like to play music with my husband.

One of the things that I have enjoyed here in the USA is meeting people of different nationalities. It is very interesting for me to hear the different cultures, foods, accents, and personalities that characterize us from our countries of origin. I think we are all interesting.



# Santiago Garcia Xelhua

From: Mexico

Current City: Eau Claire

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Four years ago, I remember my first snow in Wisconsin. My nephews and I played together in the snow. It was so much fun because it was the first time that I saw snow. The snow was very soft and fluffy. We climbed the snow mountains and pushed each other off; we made snowballs and threw them at each other. There is never snow in Mexico. My country is cloudy and foggy. The downtown is beautiful, but it never snows. I wish it snowed in Mexico. We had a happy day together. I felt like a child again. It was a short time outside, but this is a beautiful memory for me.



# Sasiwan Kanchanawong

From: Thailand

Current City: Eau Claire

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Since me and my husband were dating before we were married for a couple years, but my husband had not met my parents and my family in Thailand in person yet. I know it sounds insane but because my parents were taking care of my great aunt who is almost 100 years old, it made them unable to travel far away from her. In 2019 we decided to make a request to move to Japan, so I could visit Thailand easier and more frequently; but then when I got my order from Navy to move to Japan to accompany my husband on February 15, 2020, Japan just announced to lockdown the country to protect their citizens from Covid disease, thus it limited everyone's travel in and out of the country.

Finally, at the end of September 2022 my husband officially retired from the military, so he could get more time off to travel a little bit farther. We decided to go to Thailand to visit my family for the first time. We started our journey in the early morning from Eau Claire airport to Chicago, then we had a little break time in the Narita airport, then Suwannabhom airport in Bangkok, Thailand, with very warm weather – like 80 degrees Celsius.

The first thing I really wanted to show my husband was “street food.” In Thailand, you have so many choices of your food list and not to mention you will be able to find food vendors almost 24 hours per day. You can enjoy many kinds of tasty fresh fruits just at the corner of the block or even meatball skewers that will serve you while it's hot from the grill.

Another thing that I really wanted my husband to see was Thai culture, so I arranged some dinner, for my friend who lived in Bangkok to meet me and my husband at the Chao Praya river cruise. Unfortunately the water was too high due to flooding in Thailand at that time; we could only see some part of Rattanakosin Island while enjoying international buffet and some performances during dinner. Also me, my husband, my sister, and her friend took a one-day trip to Ayutthaya, where it was a capital of the kingdom of Siam for 417 years. We enjoyed walking to see old structures of temples and palaces as well as delicious fresh jumbo river prawn, fresh coconut water, Tom Yam prawn, and other tasty dishes without breaking our bank. Then the next day we flew to my home town city, Ubonratchathani. It's known for a candle festival.

Finally, my husband officially met my parents in person, which was cool, but one sad thing was that my great aunt had already passed away during 2020, when we still needed permit to travel then; my husband do not get a chance to meet her. Also our city got flooded so bad in our neighborhood; so many houses were flooded as well. Luckily our houses were dry and still be able for us to live there. Since we can not make any travel to the other side of the city to explore much, we decided to take my parents to take some road trip to hike at Bueng Kan. Bueng Kan is known for the Naka shrine and snake mountain (some part of the mountain looks like a snake head and snake scales). Also, we could not miss all the traditional tasty anchovy noodles with a variety of vegetables as local dish in the area.



Then we made another trip to Pattaya. Me, my husband and my sister arrived in Pattaya a couple days earlier than my parents, because they wanted to have someone watching their beloved dogs. So, my sister had to rotate time with my parents. Even though my husband visited Pattaya once with his deployment time, he did not get enough chance to explore. We rented a small sailboat to sail from central Pattaya to some small island in the area. Also, another thing you cannot miss if you are in Pattaya is to watch cabaret performances. We spent about 5 days in Pattaya to enjoy beautiful beached and delicious food every meal.

Although one month seems not enough for us to stay in Thailand, I'm glad that my husband got to know my family, our culture, and got to see some tourist attraction places in Thailand. We definitely want to go back to visit more places in the future.

## Seung Jun Kim

From: South Korea

Current City: Eau Claire

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My uncle and me were going to South Dakota and we woke up early and then it was time maybe 6am and I was cold. We ate breakfast first. We ate roast bacon.

He said, "Bacon is finger food."

I said, "Really? But I don't like finger food because fingers are not clean."

We finished breakfast he went outside and took the truck and he started the engine and engine was running. Before we went, I drank coffee with my uncle. And I got in the truck and he drove. First we went to Minnesota because we drove through Minnesota.

He said, "We will arrive in 10 hours."

I said, "Oh my goodness!"

And I took a nap and he kept drinking coffee and he kept driving because he is a trucker. And then he drove for a long time, no stopping! We soon arrived in South Dakota, but truck fuel was low. We found a gas station. And I woke-up, I bought my snack, and he bought the fuel. Truck fuel was full and we could hit the road.

We were going to motel or hotel reservation, and next day we had to eat breakfast fast because we were looking for bison, mountain goats and another animal friends. And we found a Bison crew and mountain goats! Some people click click click. We happy another people happy.

# Stéphane Nwabo Toyam

From: Cameroon

Current City: Eau Claire

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“Congratulations Stéphane, I’m glad for you!” said my mom and brothers at the Douala airport. This was Sunday night, the day where everything changed in my life. We were in the middle of Covid 19 pandemic. Traveling during that period was overwhelming. All those restrictions such as having to wear masks all the time and filling out papers to report symptoms and submitting negative PCR covid testing 48 hours before my flight made me upset. In addition, living in Yaounde did not alleviate things. Given that my hometown is Douala, 200 miles away from Yaounde, I really wanted to take off from there, so I could see my parents house and spend my last night there, which made me sweat that day.

With a mind full of hesitation and eyes full of tears, I finally submitted my resignation letter, which took about a week to write because I was thinking about my career (Math Teacher), my colleagues and finally lovely students, the main reason I decided to become a teacher. My colleagues threw me a surprise party to say goodbye, where each of them told an anecdote about me. It was full of laughter, gifts and emotion.

After putting everything in order at Yaounde, I finally arrived at Douala on Saturday, the day before I had to take off. All of this was set in a week, making me overwhelmed. Being at my father’s house, I saw all my family come from all over the country, Bandjoun, Yaounde, Douala to say goodbye.

“Stéphane, I didn’t believe that you would leave us,” said my sister-in-law. “But it is what it is.”

“This is something we have to do to be with my wife and grow our family,” I said.

“In my heart, I always knew you would have to leave. It’s okay,” she replied

I still remember the great time we spent together, that time sharing the delicious food my mother had cooked. Even with all these vibes I was not feeling so good and I had a bunch of questions blow in my mind all at once. *Am I doing the right thing? Am I going to be successful over there? I won’t eat my mom’s food any more , this fufu she knew the secret to make me like it.* Just thinking about it makes my mouth water. Leaving my family and everything I had built in my country Cameroon made me feel bad. Going to a country without even speaking the language of this country and without knowing whether it’s going to be a success for me over there.

During my flight I was on the phone with my wife talking about everything. After 16 hours of flying I finally landed at Chicago airport. I was excited to meet her. I went out of the airport waiting for her, but at the same time she was already inside the airport waiting

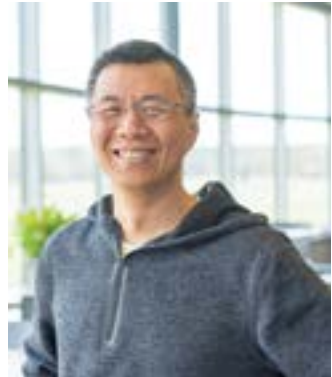
for me. That was crazy. I spent 30 minutes turned around and nervous. At the end I heard someone saying, “Stéphane, Stéphane,” and then I turned my back and saw her. At that instant I became the happiest person in the world.

I finally joined my wife and have built my new family with my first child Gabriel. It was in November 2020, I first touched this land in Chicago in the winter season. I didn't even know what the winter mean. But what I know it's that I had never felt that kind of cold. Every thing was only white around me with a high level of snow. It was my first time to see the snow, it was so strange for me. This was the commencement of my American journey.

# Sting Chou 周士琛

From: Taiwan

Current City: River Falls



Fifteen years ago, my family came to River Falls, Wisconsin in January to experience living in the U.S. It was -4 degrees fahrenheit when we walked out of the Minneapolis airport. Compared with Taipei, Taiwan, it was around 68 degrees. It was freezing, especially for people coming from Taiwan. But, my sons loved to study at River Falls, Rocky Branch Elementary School. No matter how cold it was, they played in the playground every day. Kids enjoyed snow! The teachers were so nice to my kids even if they couldn't speak any English. The community was so friendly and provided a lot of support to my family during our 5 month visit.

A couple years passed, and the kids grew up. They were middle school students in Taiwan. They always studied from 7:30am-5:00pm, 5 days a week and went to cram school until 10:00pm. Cram school is a private tiny academy where parents have to pay extra money to send kids to study again and again. And guess what, kids go to cram school on the weekend as well. At that time, we seriously considered immigrating to America.

Because we don't have relatives who live in America, family immigration was not an option. It was hard for us to get a working VISA as well.

Finally, we found out there was a green card lottery which did not have much restriction. There were 2 conditions for registration in the Green card lottery:

- 1.) You need to be born in Taiwan
- 2.) You need to have a high school diploma or higher

It was good news for us. We could try it! The bad thing was the low selected percentage. Over 10 million people register online every year. But only 55,000 green cards are available for each year. It's around a 0.1% selection rate.

We did 3 things to increase our selection chances. First we registered every year. Second, my wife and I registered separately. Last one was the most important. We read "Secret," a book about imagining what you want in your life. After we read "Secret," we started using the method in the book. We imagined the environment where we wanted to live. We imagined a lot of snow on trees in winter. Heavy snow on the roof and street as well. And we downloaded the green card picture online and put our faces on it to help us imagine.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, in June 2021, I was working from home in the afternoon. I wanted to take a quick nap. I reminded my wife we had not checked the DV2022 (aka Green Card lottery) results yet. The result had been announced since May. When I had almost fallen asleep, my wife said, "I don't understand what it means! It's weird! The result looks different from last year." To be honest, at that moment, I just wanted to sleep. A few minutes later, I realized maybe something was different this year. I totally woke up. After

checking the registration website very, very carefully...Wow! We had been selected! We could move to America to pursue our American dream. We went to a nice buffet restaurant to celebrate. We were so excited!

In 2022, there were over 110,000 people selected. An average winner requires 2 green cards. In total that would consume 220,000 green cards for all winners. But only 55,000 green cards are available each year. The VISA interview is arranged by serial number, and our serial number was located two-thirds of the way through the total winners. It was simple math. The winners in front of us needed 140,000 green cards. Oh no! It seemed like we needed a miracle, otherwise we would have to wait for the next chance. We felt so sad about it!

But in May 2022, we received an email informing us our VISA interview was arranged in July. Two weeks later, we got passport mail back after the interview. When we saw the VISA on it, we were so excited. It's hard to explain the feeling. It was real!! And then, we celebrated again!

After over 10 years registering for the green card lottery, we turned over a new leaf by moving to River Falls, WI in October 2022. We believed the reason we got our green cards was because we read the book "Secret." If you wish for something different, why not read it!

# Sutika Gurung

From: Nepal

Current City: Eau Claire

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Me and my friend Ashwina went for a ride on a scooter instead of going to tutoring. This was in 2019. At first, we did some sightseeing around Lakeside and took some pictures. Then, we went to *World of Waffles* to have waffles and beverages. After that we got into an accident with a jeep while we were heading back home. My friend was driving and I was on the back as a passenger. We were about to pass this jeep but, *CRASH!* The driver turned without even giving the right-turn signal.

Fortunately it wasn't a big accident. However, we did get injured. My friend had scratches on her legs and I got small cuts on my head, some scratches on my palm, waist and leg. Even though it was the jeep driver's fault, we were so terrified because my friend didn't have her license at the time. Some people came and supported us because they already saw that it was the driver's fault. Despite that, we fled away from there and called one of our friends who took us to get medical care: ointment and dressings.

Finally we were able to return home.

# Tanaporn Rachawong

From: Thailand

Current City: Eau Claire

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December 31st and January 1st of every year, my relatives and neighbors celebrate New Year's at my mother's house in Thailand. We usually have 30 people sitting inside and outside. It is crowded with people sitting at tables and on the floor.

We help each other cook many foods and grill chicken, beef, fish, shrimp, squid, and spicy BBQ seafood. We make seafood dipping sauce to eat with meat. Seafood dipping sauce is made from lime, chilis, fish sauce, and sugar. The sauce is delicious: spicy, sour, sweet, and salty. We have watermelon, oranges, apples, and snacks. We drink wine, beer, and fruit juices mixed with soda. We eat and drink together. We listen to new and old Thai music, sing karaoke, and dance together. We set up colorful flashing lights and set off firecrackers and fireworks. We have numbers with tags to give to each other later. Smiling faces and laughter fill my mother's house. We have a happy and fun time every year.



# Thai Lee

From: Laos

Current City: Eau Claire

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I was born in Laos, and lived with my parents, two brothers, two older sisters and a younger sister. We had so much fun when we studied at home together with our mother. My mother was a good mom for us. We walked together to school. My parents were farmers. They didn't have jobs to earn money to support us. My parents didn't have any income, but my mother knew how to make the Hmong Paj Ntaub, traditional Hmong clothing to sell at the market. However, some days it sold out and some days no one bought it.

When I was 12 years old, I was in the 5th grade of primary school. My school didn't have a textbook for any students to learn at home. I loved school, but there were many things I didn't like. It was not convenient to study and there were no libraries at the school for students' education. I wanted to make a better life for my family in the future. When I lived in Laos, I wanted to study English. But tuition fees were very high. It was hard for us to find money to pay the education bill.

I remember when I was 14 years old. I went to high school. My teacher needed all students to take a phone to take photos of the teacher's textbook. So I wanted to get a phone and I asked my mom to buy it for me, but she didn't have enough money. I felt sad after that. I went back to school like before. There were many things that the teacher asked me to take a photo of and write the homework at home. At that time, it was hard for me, because my school did not have enough textbooks and I told the teacher that I didn't have a phone. Sometimes the teacher read to us in class, and we wrote it in our notebooks. So again, I asked my mother to buy a phone for me and she told me that she would buy it for my birthday. I was glad to hear her say that. It was still three months until my birthday, but I felt like it was so long. My mother told me to wait for it.

Finally, on my birthday, my mother bought me a new phone. My family celebrated my birthday; my mother cooked the food, we ate dinner and cake together. I got a special gift from my mother. It made me sleepless. I felt very happy and I was able to take a photo of the teacher's textbook. After that I did not worry about studying.

# The Chihuahua Lady

From: Nicaragua

Current City: Eau Claire

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I made the decision to travel to the United States due to the situation my country Nicaragua was going through. In March 2018, the government decided to lower the money to retirees, and the elderly protested. The government treated them very badly, and the young university students rose up against the government. In April 2018, they went on strike and the government killed students, and the town rose against the government and began to demonstrate in support of the young university students.

On February 2, 2022, I said goodbye to my mother without her knowing that it was the last hug we would give each other. I did not tell her about my trip because it was very dangerous, and she could get sick with worry. On February 3 at midnight, my children said goodbye to me between tears and hugs because we did not know when we would see each other again and if I would reach my destination alive.

I traveled through Honduras, Salvador, Guatemala, and Mexico to reach the United States. My trip lasted 14 days. When I crossed through Mexico, I felt very scared and worried that something would happen to me. I told my children that everything was fine so as not to worry them and at the same time, I gathered courage and moved on. When I arrived at the American border, I felt very relieved and protected, and I told my family I was safe.

# Toma Boychenko

From: Ukraine

Current City: Eau Claire

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Every summer my family goes on vacation together. Our favorite place to go is Florida. Florida is tropical, with fresh ocean scents and palm trees. We stay at an ocean-front hotel. My great-granddaughter, Tamila, likes swimming in the salty ocean water, looking at the fish, and building sandcastles. Last summer, we visited the Salvador Dali Museum. I liked the surrealist paintings. In the evening, we went on a cruise ship. There was a restaurant and disco where we danced. Tamila danced with her papa in her dress that matched her mom's. We ate and watched a beautiful opera singer. This was fantastic. We remember our vacations. Everyone enjoys the family holidays.





# Tommy Tian

From: China

Current City: Hudson

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During my 2017 summer break, me and my cousin went to Hong Kong for a visit. That was my first time leaving mainland China. The China mainland phone number would not work in Hong Kong. So, we didn't have the internet. We could not use the map app.

We visited the Hong Kong University campus. The campus location is near a hill, so the buildings on the campus are very complex. Then we got lost on the Hong Kong University campus. We didn't know how to leave. However, we met a young girl. She found out we were lost. She tried to communicate with us. First, she spoke Cantonese, which is the local language in Hong Kong. But me and my cousin, we come from the Northwest of China. We don't understand Cantonese even a little bit. After a few moments, she found that we couldn't understand Cantonese. Then she tried to speak Japanese and Korean, because we are Asian. Unfortunately, we didn't understand either. Finally, she changed to English to speak with us. We gradually understood what she said. She helped us find the right way to leave.

I was so surprised that she could speak a lot of different languages. She looked similar to me. For me, I couldn't even speak English fluently. At that moment, I found a difference between me and people like her. So, I decided to apply to graduate school. I want to be better than before, I want to gain more knowledge, and I want to explore a different world.



# Yan Yun Dong

From: China

Current City: Eau Claire

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February 23, 2023, my son was honored with a special breakfast in high school because he had a 4.0 GPA. The night before the breakfast, I couldn't sleep. I was nervous thinking about being the only Asian mom at the breakfast and was wondering who I would sit next to. I was awake until 5 am.

However, I wanted to attend. I took a hot shower, put on makeup, and wore nice clothes. Then we went to the school cafeteria. I saw many parents, students, and teachers, and many different types of bread, fruit, coffee, juice, and hot chocolate. The breakfast was very delicious.

I learned my son was a hardworking student who got a 4.0 GPA. In order to support my son, I need to be brave. When I went to the breakfast, I was not nervous anymore. I was just proud of my son, I forgot about my worries.

# Yuliia Kuznietsova

From: Ukraine

Current City: Menomonie

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I and my sister, her name is Marina and she is younger than me, went to a concert in Kyiv. Khurmat, my husband, drove the car. The musicians there were our favorite because I like pop musicians and I love to dance. The audience was energetic. They jumped and danced, yelling loudly. It was cool!



## About the Designers

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This book was designed by CVTC Students  
Alli Ahrndt and Ada Couillard as part of the  
Graphic Design Capstone Course.

### Alexandra Ahrndt

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Alexandra Ahrndt is a 2023 graphic design graduate from Chippewa Valley Technical College. She is looking forward to pursuing a graphic design career, and going back to her hometown of Blaine, Minnesota.



### Ada Couillard

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Ada Couillard was born in San Francisco, California, but spent their entire life in Eau Claire, Wisconsin. They graduated from Chippewa Valley Technical College in 2023 with an Associate Degree in Applied Science in Graphic Design. They are looking forward to their June 2023 trip to Japan.



***Voices of the Valley: Immigrant Stories from Students of Chippewa Valley Technical College***, is a collaboration to amplify the voices and stories of English learning adults at CVTC. Written and designed by CVTC students and guided by their instructors, *Voices of the Valley* aims to give you a glimpse of the diverse individuals that call Western Wisconsin home.

