

A sister from Lebanon (10)

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Moving to the United States was the biggest step I took in my life. Suddenly I am completely out of my culture, my people and anything belongs to my past. A definite new beginning. It reminded of my grandfather who I never met. My mom use to tell us that around early 1900, her father took the ship and came to New York seeking an opportunity for a better life for him and for his family. It took him six months in the boat to arrive. He sold few acres of land in his village in order to travel. But it was hard for him and he couldn't make a living here so he went back to his country.

Raising up 5 kids all by myself was an overwhelming task. Larry leaves in the morning and comes back in the evening. I didn't drive in that time beside I didn't know anyone other than Larry's family. My in-law's attitude was we already supported you so it's your responsibility to take care of your children.

I felt kind of abandoned and isolated. So to survive the moment I turned to my neighbors. We had a small park beside our house where I use to take the children to. I start reaching out to the mothers who have same age kids of mine and invite them to my house. The children will play together and we enjoy coffee time together. In this way, I made a lot of friends and the children made a lot of friends as well. Connecting to my neighbors and serving them saved me and my children from loneliness and feeling stuck.

It was a big surprise for my mother in law who lived here for over 40 years and she barely new her neighbors. I guess my culture and " la joie de vivre " that the Lebanese has it in their gene helped me to adjust quickly to my new environment.

I remember our pastor, Rev Thompson, talking in one of his sermons about his mother's visit to California. She came to know all our neighbors, he said, while she is visiting us.

Yeah, that was exactly what I did. And from that moment on, I build a long lasting friendship. And what made it more interesting is by reaching out to my neighbors, I felt connected to the whole world and that I am standing in an international stage. Our neighbors were from different nationalities and backgrounds. I learned about what it means celebrating Diwali with my Indian neighbors and Chinese New Year with my Chinese friend.

I remember inviting one time for dinner my neighbors with their parents who came to visit them from Holland. When the parents went back home they sent us a box of dutch chocolate and since then, every Christmas, we receive a nice Christmas card from them.

Another experience was with a British grandma who was visiting her son's family in California. I met her in the park and her grandson starts playing with Scott and Helen.

I invited her for tea. She came few times to my house and she met Larry. When she came back to London she sent us a card thanking us for welcoming her in our house and telling Larry that if he ever visited United Kingdom, he has a room to stay.

Meantime, in Lebanon, Adel and Pauline decided to move to New Zealand. The country was failing economically and was very hard on Adel's family to survive specially after their fourth child was born.

On the other hand, Ahmad and Vera with their little daughter Sara moved to Korea. There was no opportunity in Iran to grow and to develop. The country in that time had sanctions and a lot of young Iranian people who are very educated didn't have jobs. The only country who gave them visas was Korea so they moved to there.

In 2001, the doctors recommended an open heart surgery for Larry to replace his heart valve. He was only 47 years old. The surgery took about 8 hours. And because our children were very young, specially Scott and Helen, four and three years old, the doctor recommended for Larry to not be with the kids as he has a lot of stitches in his chest and the kids might jump on him by mistake so it will hurt him a lot. So we arranged with grandma for Larry to stay in her house for 3 weeks until he has a full recovery.

It was very frustrating to me to always ask someone to stay with the kids and someone to drive me to grandma's house to visit my husband. Also I was worried if he needed any help at night where he slept in the second floor by himself while his old mom sleeping downstairs far from him. Every time We saw each other, we hug and cry. We felt so vulnerable. I couldn't be beside him, helping him in his recovery and he couldn't be with me supporting me with the children. But God was by our side. And the ones who have God by their side will never be defeated.

To be continued