



# **Going to America?**

**Get**  
**INSIDE**  
**Information**

**Lydia Sin**

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## *Dedication*

*To my husband, Edwin:  
My best friend who inspires  
me and always gives me loving  
support*

*To my children, Jabez and  
Daphne:  
My close friends who give me  
much joy and laughter*

*To my family in Singapore and  
my surrogate family in America:  
Kindred souls who have blessed  
me in countless ways*



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My friends who read this book and gave me their valued opinions so that I could improve and make this reader-friendly.



## *Preface*

My husband Edwin and I have met many wonderful friends during our stay in America. When we first stepped on U.S. soil, some friends graciously helped us to settle in by giving us valued advice. In turn, we found ourselves advising many other Singaporeans, Malaysians, and Asians who are new to the U.S. and needed a helping hand to adjust to life in America. I wrote this book because I was helped and would like to help others.

My family has spent about 10 years living in the U.S. and has had a myriad of different experiences. As you can imagine, we have had our fair share of gaffes and hope that, by living vicariously through our experiences, you will have a shorter learning curve to enjoying life here. America is a huge and diversified country, so if you are living in the southern states or maybe Alaska, you may well have some unique experiences that are different from our experiences in the Washington, D.C. area. Nonetheless, I believe this book touches on many common experiences.

Some ethnic groups have problems immersing into mainstream American culture, perhaps because they do not speak English or are more homogenous in their ethnic make-up. They may choose to live their lives in America just immersed in their ethnic enclaves. I would advise you to find your comfort zone and also open up to the locals here, and relish the American experience.

I have deliberately written this book in American English so you may find that the grammar, spelling, and choice of words are different from the British English that some Asians are used to. I hope that will give you a head start to life in America. Please visit my blog at <http://usainsideinfo.blogspot.com/> for other vignettes of American life not covered in this book. For feedback and comments, please email me at [usainsideinfo@gmail.com](mailto:usainsideinfo@gmail.com).



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## LEAVING FOR THE U.S.

You may wonder what it is like to live abroad in the U.S. Before you take the plunge and say yes to that overseas posting or overseas education, read on and find out some of the issues I faced living abroad in the U.S. for 10 years as you may well face similar issues.

For me, the thought of leaving Singapore to live abroad captivated me — new experiences, another culture, and fascinating sights. The fact that I was going to live in the U.S. made it doubly exciting. There was a push factor as well — I wanted some respite from ‘pressure-cooker’ Singapore. My husband and I were in the throes of mid-life, and we were definitely ready for a little adventure outside Singapore.

Though thrilled about living in the U.S., we were somewhat apprehensive about leaving Singapore with all its familiarity. For Edwin, my husband, a big unknown would be the new work environment and how he would thrive in it. For me, it was not the ‘going’ but the ‘coming back’ that unnerved me. I dreaded the thought of coming back to Singapore after our posting and helping my kids adjust back to the rigorous Singapore school system. Some well-meaning friends thought I was sacrificing my kids by taking them out of the Singapore system. In their opinion, it would be nearly impossible to flow back into the unrelenting tide of our curriculum. I considered their opinions but did not think I was jeopardizing my kids’ future. I was confident that my kids would benefit from the overseas exposure in the long run, but I did shudder at the thought of how they would adjust back to the system after three years’ of absence. Fortunately, there were enough distractions to help me shove that thought aside as I prepared to leave for what I thought would be a 3-year adventure. As it turned out, that adventure would become a decade-long sojourn in the U.S.

With 10 years' experience of living in the U.S., I wrote this book to help others who are heading this way. You would probably have some of the questions I had as I prepared for the big move. What are Americans like, and how do I relate to them? What is the work culture like? How do I survive and even thrive in this foreign land? If you have kids like I do, maybe you have some burning questions about the education system. Or, you may have questions about applying to study in a U.S. university. You would definitely have an interest in food, shopping bargains, and vacations. I have addressed all these concerns so that you can take a shorter and smoother route to adjusting well in this vast country.

## WHY WE LEFT SINGAPORE FOR THE U.S.

This wonderful opportunity to live abroad came when Edwin applied for an overseas posting to work at the Singapore Embassy in Canberra. There were 300 applicants for this coveted post since Australia is regarded as a plum posting. We got the posting — his colleagues thought it was better than striking lottery but we knew it was more than luck as we have been praying fervently for this posting. Edwin and I went on a reconnaissance trip to Canberra to do various administrative tasks such as setting up our bank accounts and getting schools for the kids. There was a twist however. Shortly after our trip to Canberra, we were told that the post in Australia would be closed and a new post would open up in Washington, D.C. Edwin's boss asked if he wanted this new post in the U.S. Of course! So, in April 1998, we headed for the U.S. capital instead.

## PREPARING FOR THE BIG MOVE

Filled with excitement, we prepared for the big move to Washington, D.C. Besides endless rounds of farewells and feasting sessions with dear friends and family, we sold our cars, rented out our house, got medical records, and settled school affairs for the kids, ages 10 and six. I did some frantic shopping and loaded up my container with some comfort items not available in the U.S. A *kiasu* Singapore Mom, I also headed for Popular bookstore to stock up on Singapore textbooks and assessment books for the kids (*kiasu* means competitive and not wanting to lose out to others).

In the midst of wrapping up affairs at home, I was also trying to find out more about the new place we were going to. While Edwin would be working in Washington, D.C., we would be staying in the state of Maryland, a suburb of the Washington, D.C. office hub. Fortunately, a friend connected me with a Singaporean living in Maryland, and I bombarded her with many questions in a flurry of emails.

We learnt that there is a small Singapore community in Maryland, mainly in the cities of Rockville, Bethesda, and Chevy Chase, located in close proximity to one another. Several of these families are from the Singapore Embassy, while other families are with government and private institutions. There are Singaporeans working with the Economic Development Board, the International Monetary Fund, World Bank, and IBM. Later, we would learn that there are even more Singaporeans living in the greater Washington, D.C. area (encompasses Washington, D.C. and the nearby suburbs of Maryland and Northern Virginia). There are also many other Asian communities here, hailing mainly from Taiwan, China, Korea, India, and Japan.

Edwin and I went on a reconnaissance trip provided for by his organization, and that was invaluable. To us, it was an important consideration to stay near other Singaporeans. With the help of a real estate agent, we managed to secure a house with easy access to a train station and major shopping centers. We learnt about a key trait in the U.S. when we were house-hunting. There are safe neighborhoods, and there are other residential areas that are not conducive for families. Choose a neighborhood that is safe and family friendly. This concept is rather foreign to us, as all Singapore neighborhoods are relatively safe. What complicated the house hunting is that real estate agents are not supposed to tell us directly about the safety of the neighborhood as that would be considered passing judgment and bad-mouthing the community; they could be held accountable if valuation of the houses and rental values tumble. I learnt that one sure way to assess the neighborhood is — do you see kids playing outdoors and residents taking walks around the neighborhood? Those are indications that it is safe to venture outside.

We know of a Singapore family who had signed a rental contract in a tough neighborhood ('tough' is often used by Americans as a euphemism for 'unsafe') and as a result had to keep their two kids indoors. They were alarmed by sounds of gunshots and rumors of drug dealing in the apartment block that they stayed in. We became friends with this family and persuaded them to move to a family-friendly area. As for us, we were glad to be able to rent a house in a good area. During our reconnaissance trip, we also visited schools, trying to seek out a suitable one for our kids. This was harder. We were bewildered by the array of public and private schools. This will be addressed in Chapter 4 Creative Education.

## COMING HOME TO SINGAPORE AFTER THREE YEARS

In September 2001, just before the 9/11 terrorist attacks, we headed home for Singapore after Edwin had completed his work posting. While adapting to the U.S. system of education had posed some challenges, the bigger hurdle was fitting back into the Singapore system. The key issue confronting us was: which schools will our kids go to? Naturally we wanted the best schools for our son who was going to Secondary 3 and for our daughter who would be in Primary 4. As soon as we landed on Singapore soil, we plunged the kids into intensive tutoring (Americans say 'tutoring' instead of 'tuition') on the Singapore curriculum as we needed to prepare them for the entrance tests to various good schools. These tests were a micro version of the final year examinations held at the schools for those levels. That was tough! Though I had gone to the U.S. armed with Singapore textbooks and assessment books, it was unrealistic to expect the kids to do well in the U.S. curriculum and, at the same time, keep pace with the Singapore syllabus. Despite my earnest attempts to do that, the kids were, as expected, out of sync with the Singapore curriculum, particularly for Mathematics and Chinese.

I called several schools and tried to make appointments to meet with the principals to discuss my children's circumstances. Appointments were hard to come by, and most of the officers we spoke to were largely unsympathetic to our predicament. Though the kids have done extremely well in their schools in U.S., some schools wanted to place them on a lower grade if they did not make it through the entrance tests. Thankfully, we finally met two principals who placed value on Singaporeans going abroad to work and were willing to admit the kids to the right levels for their ages.



It was a tough transition for the kids. Their biggest hurdle was Chinese, though English also posed some problems. Although the English curriculum in the U.S. was more demanding, I realized that the main challenge to good English grades in Singapore was finding out where the marks were awarded and hot-housing my kids to hit those scores. In the months following our de-posting, the kids' lives revolved around schoolwork and tutoring classes. Jabez, my 15-year-old son, had a more challenging curriculum to cope with — he continued with Express Chinese and needed intensive tutoring. His simple aim was to pass the subject and even that posed a challenge. When Jabez eventually got a credible C5 for the GCE 'O' levels, he jumped for joy! Daphne, my 10-year-old daughter, was exempted from Chinese and had a smoother transition. Since I was preoccupied with helping my kids succeed in the Singapore system, I took up a teaching position in a premier tutoring center as I was impressed by its success formula to help kids score As. My husband settled back to the routine of his job and generally, we adjusted well to our home environment, happy to be surrounded by the familiarity of family and friends again.

## HEAD FOR THE U.S. AGAIN

However, after spending 19 months in Singapore, the Tan family was presented with another opportunity to go back to the U.S. Edwin was getting restless in his job and was receptive when offered another job posting in the Washington, D.C. area. He still had a warm trail of contacts, and he seized the opportunity. As with the first posting, there was some apprehension. Though Daphne was raring to go, Jabez was reluctant to be uprooted again. We did not know it then but he had some unpleasant experiences in the U.S. schools that he did not want to relive — I think being in the U.S. during his early

teenage years (11–14 years old) was uncomfortable because it was difficult to form strong friendships. Glad to be back in Singapore, he was looking forward to co-ed Junior College life after spending two years in the all-boys Anglo-Chinese School (Independent). I was initially reluctant to leave Singapore again but thought it was still the best option for the entire family as Jabez would be able to get an early start to university in the U.S.

It is a miracle that Jabez managed to get a place in the University of Maryland (College Park) at 16 years of age, since not many well-ranked universities would accept 16-year-olds who have completed only Secondary 4 (10<sup>th</sup> grade equivalent). American universities require that students complete 12<sup>th</sup> grade that is equivalent to Junior College 2. It was a wonderful answer to prayer. Jabez was also fortunate to be able to defer his National Service (mandatory military service) under a policy that if he gets into university before he is 17½ years old, he will be allowed to complete his university studies. (This is no longer possible as a new policy is in place.) He graduated in 2008 with a degree in Aerospace/Aeronautical Engineering and returned to Singapore for two years of military training.

At the time that this book is published, the Tan family is split, with three members still living in the U.S. I anticipate that my husband, my daughter, and I would still be living in the U.S. for the next few years. My family has gone through a spectrum of experiences during our 10-year stay in the U.S., and I hope that, by living vicariously through our experiences, you will be able to get inside information that will help you to adjust quickly to living in the U.S.





## WHAT ARE AMERICANS LIKE?

*We have become not a melting pot but a beautiful mosaic.  
Different people, different beliefs, different yearnings, different hopes,  
different dreams.*

— President Jimmy Carter, U.S. President (1977–1981)

What are Americans like? What drives them, how do they treat family, and what is the psyche of an American? These are some questions that I ponder on when I try to understand my American friends. There are ambivalent attitudes towards the U.S. around the world. Some decry Americans as self-centered, opinionated, and ethnocentric while many find American values attractive. Before I lived in the U.S., my perceptions of Americans were mainly culled from the media and Hollywood movies. How erroneous! I think they fail to do Americans justice — their portrayal of Americans tends to be negative and inaccurate. They paint a picture of the extremities of America rather than the average American. Naturally so, since the media and film industry are prone to sensationalism. They often depict American males as brash and violent, American women as forward and sexually immoral, and American families as dysfunctional.

Having lived in the U.S. for 10 years, I have grown to like Americans — they have many endearing qualities. Competitive, diligent, individualistic, friendly, funny — these characteristics come to my mind. I value their deep sense of compassion, and their tender spot for the weak, the defenseless, and the underdog. I particularly enjoy the brand of self-deprecating humor that many Americans possess — they are able to laugh at themselves and diffuse tensions through laughter. The Americans that I meet are family-oriented though many

are experiencing serious family problems since the U.S. divorce rate is high.

There are some negative traits of Americans as well. Some are ethnocentric and view Americans as superior to the rest of the world. Others have an insular mindset as they have never traveled outside the U.S. and have little interest in the rest of the world. As with Asians, there are wonderful and inspiring Americans and others who are less so.

## THE AMERICAN DREAM

America is a melting pot, or maybe a mosaic, of immigrants who come here to fulfill dreams that they were unable to attain in their previous homeland. To understand the American psyche, you need to understand the American dream. It means being free to pursue happiness and attain personal aspirations. Americans hold on dearly to freedom. The first immigrants braved many odds to come to the U.S. to be free from religious oppression. Americans esteem education and cherish the chance to become prosperous through education and hard work. Many believe it is possible to go from rags to riches in this vast country of opportunities, and maybe that is why Americans applaud the underdog who succeeds against all odds. A key symbol in the American dream is a lovely house — this is a sure sign that an American is successful and has arrived. The house connotes the warmth of family as well; the dream encompasses having a family with kids living in that house. Hopefully, there is a front yard and a backyard as well for gardening, and for the kids to have fun in. This basic aspiration drives many Americans.

As an extension of the American dream, Americans are house-proud. Do not be surprised to hear them chat excitedly about improvements on their house such as remodeling the kitchen, extending the family room, or building a new deck for summer barbeques (the Americans call it cookouts). They are into home improvement big time, and many are adept at DIY (Do It Yourself) projects. Middle-class Americans aspire to own single-family homes (bungalows in Singapore lingo) and spend many happy hours sprucing up the home. Most Americans love their gardens and try to make sure that their lawns are lush and neat. If the garden is unkempt, it affects the ambience and character of the neighborhood, and also annoys the neighbors. We learnt this early in our stay when a well-meaning neighbor made an oblique remark that the grass in our front yard is too long — we got it, the grass needed mowing.

In the Washington, D.C. area, many Americans choose to own a dream house in the suburbs and are willing to bear with a long commute to work. Houses are more affordable in the suburbs compared to the residential areas nearer Washington, D.C. With the exodus of human traffic from suburbs to downtown in the mornings and vice versa in the evenings, traffic snarls are common in this area. A major expressway, the 495 Beltway, links Washington, D.C., Maryland, and Virginia. Reputed to be one of the worst roads to navigate in the U.S., it is often gridlocked during peak hours. I can attest that it is a nightmare especially during bad weather conditions as there was a one-year period during which I spent three hours on the 495 Beltway every day.

## SENSE OF GOD AND ETHICS

Americans have a godly heritage, and many proclaim America as ‘one nation under God,’ as they say the American pledge daily. There is an inscription: ‘In God We Trust’ in all American currency — all the dollar notes as well as the coins (I checked!). Judeo-Christian values are deeply entrenched in the U.S. culture; I think that explains why Americans have a keen sense of morality, of right and wrong. America is widely perceived to be a nation birthed by God and continually blessed by God. When the pilgrims landed in the U.S. in the 1600s, they were looking to God to provide a refuge from religious persecution back home. These pilgrims set the tone for the religious rubric of the nation. U.S. presidents often invoke God in their speeches:

*America was founded by people who [believed] that God was their Rock of safety. I recognize we must be cautious in claiming that God is on our side, but I think it's all right to keep asking if we're on His side.*

— President Ronald Reagan, U.S. President (1981–1989)

*Tonight I ask for your prayers for all who grieve, for all the children whose worlds have been shattered, for all whose sense of safety and security has been threatened. And I pray they will be comforted by a Power greater than any of us. Spoken through the ages in Psalm 23: ‘Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for you are with me.’*

— President George W. Bush, U.S. President (2001–2009)  
Addressing the nation on the evening of September 11, 2001.

Belief in God and in the Bible has been pivotal in shaping America. Americans observe a National Day of Prayer during the first Thursday of May, as mandated by Congress in 1952. On Thanksgiving Day, the fourth Thursday of November, the U.S. President signs a proclamation calling on Americans “to pray in thanksgiving for our freedoms and blessings.” The proclamation calls on Americans to acknowledge God’s continued blessings on the nation. However, America remains a nation that guarantees the free exercise of religion. Immigrants who come to the U.S. are free to practice their own religions, and Americans are careful to separate the church and the state.

I am intrigued by the honor system that pervades U.S. society, and I think it stems from the Protestant ethics that are deeply rooted in Americans. The honor system assumes that Americans have integrity and will do the right thing. At train stations, the simple newspaper vending machine testifies that the honor system works (most of the time) — you insert coins for one copy of newspaper and have access to the entire stack of newspapers but you only take one copy! (This will not work in Singapore.) If I lose an item in the U.S., the chances that I will be able to get it back is rather high; some kind and honest soul will bring it to the ‘lost and found’ section or leave it where it is for the owner to come back and retrieve it. At most grocery stores, I am allowed to scan my own purchases and pay, usually without supervision as to whether I scanned and paid for ALL my items or just some of them. I like being trusted to do the right thing. The honor system works most of the time though I daresay that it has been abused sometimes. I believe these Bible verses help explain why the honor system works:

*1 Peter 3:12*

*The eyes of the Lord watch over those who do right, and his ears are open to their prayers. But the Lord turns his face against those who do evil.*

*Colossians 3:23*

*Work willingly at whatever you do, as though you were working for the Lord rather than for people.*

## SPORTS

*Jabez: “Daddy, you must remain loyal to the Redskins, once a Redskin fan, always a Redskin fan.”*

*Edwin: “No, son, I am now rooting for the Steelers, they are a better team.”*

Sports is a big facet of American life, and both my husband and son have caught the U.S. football bug. My son loyally roots for the Washington, D.C. football team, the Redskins, while my husband now prefers the Pittsburgh team, the Steelers. Americans are passionate about this subject. Sports fans monitor their favorite teams and their preferred players closely. They admire and idolize key players, and are loyal to the teams they root for. There is much bantering among sports enthusiasts who support opposing teams. Sports memorabilia is treasured and can be sold at atrociously high prices. For instance, my American boss bought a baseball jersey of a famous baseball player for her son, and it was so valuable that it was encased in a glass frame and insured!

Everyone who comes to America must watch the Super Bowl, a quintessential American experience! It refers to the National Football

League's championship game held in February every year. The Super Bowl frenzy exemplifies the sports craze. During this sports highlight of the year, millions of American families will be glued to their televisions watching the game, the famed advertisements (which in 2009 reputedly cost US\$3 million for 30 seconds!) and the half-time show, which is a musical interlude. It is a great time to gather with family and friends, and pig out in front of the television. For a sports ignoramus like me, Super Bowl is mainly about the half-time show, the intriguing advertisements, and the food.

There are different sports emphases for the different seasons. In autumn, referred to more commonly as fall (for falling leaves), the American football season dominates; for spring, it is baseball, basketball, and soccer; in the winter, there is ice hockey and basketball as well. To be adept at social conversations, particularly with the guys, you need to be in the know about American sports and preferably root for your own favorite team. Fortunately, my son is interested and skilled in various sports, and that helped him to bond with neighbors, school friends, and church friends through playing the sport or discussing the game.

You may have heard of 'soccer moms' and 'hockey moms' in the U.S. It refers to mothers who virtuously chauffeur their kids to and from soccer/hockey practices and games; they are avid supporters of the teams their kids belong to. There are different kinds of sports moms in the U.S. As a 'basketball mom,' I helped facilitate the basketball team that my daughter was part of and faithfully watched all her games. American parents are keen to have their children involved in sports. The philosophy is that kids need to be fruitfully occupied, and sports is one area to absorb their energy. I fully agree with that. Being part of a sports team also helps the child develop social skills

and expose them to teamwork. Furthermore, in the U.S. education system, competence in sports is valued and can open doors to prestigious colleges and scholarships. A kid who performs well in sports is usually admired and destined for popularity. Besides 'soccer moms,' Dads are also keenly involved, sometimes as coaches to the junior sports teams. For a typical American family, it is common to spend the entire weekend ferrying kids to various sports practices and competitions, and supporting the teams in various ways.

## CHILDREN

Americans have a soft spot for children. Kids, also affectionately referred to as kiddos or munchkins, are doted on and made much of. I think Americans generally tend to be more indulgent towards their children than Asian parents. Children are seen as vulnerable and hence, there are many rules in place to protect children. Any violation of children's rights will raise the hackles of Americans. However, Americans have a different idea from Asians of what is acceptable discipline for kids — many do not believe in caning their kids. Many Asians struggle with this when they are in the U.S. because we believe that we should not spare the rod and spoil the child as advised in Proverbs 23:13-14 "Don't fail to discipline your children. They won't die if you spank them. Physical discipline may well save them from death." In the U.S., cane marks could be misconstrued as cruelty and could result in kids being taken away from their parents and handed to social services for safe custody. My friend was flabbergasted that her 9-year-old son called the police when she caned him — apparently the school had taught him that he should report anyone who hits him, and that includes his parents.

I was surprised to learn that in Maryland, it is illegal to leave young children (younger than eight) at home by themselves. They have to be in the care of someone who is at least 13 years old. My kids were six and 10 when they arrived in the U.S. so we had to be careful to observe this rule. If violated, we could be charged with child neglect. I guess that is one reason why there is a thriving baby-sitting industry here. My teenage daughter has done various child-sitting jobs that pay US\$8 to US\$10 per hour.

## AMERICAN FAMILIES

There are many close-knit families in the U.S. though they are often separated and live in different states. Sometimes family members only meet once or twice a year, during Thanksgiving and Christmas. Many kids leave home to go to college in a different state and may end up working, marrying, and living outside their home state as well. There are many struggling families as the divorce rate is about 50%, resulting in single-parent families and blended families. In elementary school, my daughter saw two of her friends being devastated when their parents divorced. Being acquainted with the mothers, it was painful for me to witness the break-up of families firsthand. After the divorce, many Americans remarry and in turn form blended families. For instance, if two single parents with kids marry each other, their new blended family would include children from their previous marriages and they may well have kids together after marriage. This means that if my kids go for play dates, they may be exposed to other family members whom I have not met such as their stepbrothers, stepsisters, and half-siblings. I do not feel comfortable with that, so I often try to arrange play dates at my house instead. It is wise to be aware of the family situation of the friends that your kids spend time with. On one occasion, Daphne came back from a play date and told

me that her friend's Dad possessed many guns which are kept in the drawers; since I am not sure if the guns are properly stored under lock and key, I did not allow her to go to the friend's house again.

## PETS AND RIGHTS OF ANIMALS

Americans love their pets, especially cats and dogs. Many singles live in apartments by themselves, with their pets as the constant and faithful companions. Talking about pets is a great conversation starter and a way of bonding with co-workers and like-minded friends. My daughter happens to be passionate about dogs (besides horses and dolphins) and begged to have a dog. After five years of persistent pestering, we finally succumbed and now have a Shetland sheepdog (Sheltie). When we first got our Sheltie puppy, many neighbors who do not socialize with us previously started talking excitedly to us about Sweet Pea, our Sheltie. We have bonded with many friends while dog-sitting for one another. There are rules in the U.S. governing how pets should be treated. For instance, when the weather is too cold in winter, pet owners should not leave their pets outside and when the weather is too hot in summer, they should not leave their pets in the car where they could suffocate. Pet owners can be prosecuted for mistreating their pets. They can also be sued if their pet is a nuisance to others.

At the time when I was writing this chapter, President Obama has just selected Bo, a Portuguese water dog, as the presidential pooch. The whole Washington, D.C. area was abuzz with this news. President George W. Bush's Scottish terrier, Barney, even has his own page on the White House website with video links and photos. It is said that the book on President George Bush Senior's Springer spaniel sold



more copies than the President's biography. I think that goes to show the priorities of Americans!

## VOLUNTEERISM

Volunteerism is valued in the U.S. Besides Moms and Dads volunteering in various roles for sports teams, Americans feel they owe a debt to the community that has nurtured them, and they feel a need to repay that debt. If they are successful, they want to give back to the society that has contributed to their success. For instance, Bill Gates gives generously to the University of Washington that had given him access to their computer lab when he was a school kid. Gates said, "I believe with great wealth comes great responsibility — the responsibility to give back to society and make sure those resources are given back in the best possible way, to those in need."

Americans give back through financial contributions as well as giving their time and energy. It is common for parents to volunteer in schools, and most Americans are pleased to do something that helps the community such as volunteering at libraries or museums. There is a certain altruism and communal spirit about Americans which I admire. Though individualism is a dominant trait in American society, they also see themselves as part of a larger community and take pride in being part of an outstanding nation. My daughter is required to complete 60 hours of community service in order to graduate from high school, and I think that provides a solid foundation for kids to help the less fortunate. Daphne has helped to conduct summer programs for inner city kids in Washington, D.C. and raised funds for starving children in Africa by undertaking challenging 30-hour fasts on a few occasions. I believe that the compassion of Americans

helps to drive their zeal for volunteerism. Many Americans desire to help the disadvantaged, including those who are disabled and mentally challenged.

*We need a spirit of community, a sense that we are all in this together. If we have no sense of community, the American dream will wither.*

— President Bill Clinton, U.S. President (1993–2001)

## BEWARE THE 'SUE' CULTURE

Sadly, the 'sue' culture pervades American culture to the point of being ludicrous. Even before I arrived, I was cautioned to take that into account in my interaction with Americans. I have to be careful when inviting guests to my house because if they are injured while in my house, they might sue me. Initially, I was reluctant to invite American kids to my house. Subsequently, I became more relaxed and even allowed my daughter to host her birthday parties at home, playing host to 10 to 20 kids. At the back of my mind, I am always conscious of making sure my house is relatively safe. During snow days, I worry that pedestrians might get hurt walking on the sidewalk in front of my house — under the state laws, I am responsible for clearing the snow and ice on the sidewalks adjacent to my house. I also take the 'sue' culture into consideration when getting cleaners to come to my house. I need to ensure that the cleaners were insured, as I am liable to be sued if they are hurt while working in my house. When my teenagers learnt how to drive, well-meaning friends advised me to take out an umbrella accident insurance policy, warning me that if my child, a minor younger than 18, was involved in a car accident, the other party might sue the parents. In some cases, families have lost their properties to pay compensation.

Here is a hilarious incident somewhat reflective of the ridiculous extent that litigation has affected the U.S. culture (reported in the Washington Post, October 21, 2004):

*The world's whales, porpoises, and dolphins have no standing to sue President Bush over the U.S. Navy's use of sonar equipment that harms marine mammals, a federal appeals court ruled Wednesday. A three-judge panel of the Court of Appeal...said it saw no reason animals should not be allowed to sue but said they had not yet been granted that right.*

*Author's note: Will there be a day when my dog would be granted rights to sue me?*

Do Americans sue for principle or profit? There is, probably, a mix of both intentions. Countless Americans have obtained big bucks through litigation. Big business corporations are targets of those who want to sue for money, including McDonald's and Wal-Mart. The people's jury system, integral in the American legal system, allows for the jury to be manipulated by individuals for their own gain. With the common man in the street as a juror instead of an informed person who knows the law, there are many loopholes that can be exploited. The defence lawyer, prosecutor, and even other jurors, can manipulate the emotions of an untrained and unsuspecting juror. Hence, high drama is a key feature of American courtrooms. Many believe that there is some truth in the movie, *Runaway Jury*, which suggests that it is possible to buy a juror and hence manipulate the verdict of the court case.

Be aware of the litigation culture that pervades America. Sometimes, lawsuits border on the ridiculous.

## PATRIOTISM AND AMERICAN DEMOCRACY

*And so, my fellow Americans: ask not what your country can do for you — ask what you can do for your country. My fellow citizens of the world: ask not what America will do for you, but what together we can do for the freedom of man.*

— President John F. Kennedy, U.S. President (1961–1963)

The patriotic spirit in the U.S. is amazing. It is particularly prominent during times of crises such as the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Americans rally together and bury their differences when there is an external enemy they have to reckon with. They love their flag and sing their national anthem *The Star-Spangled Banner* with passion and pride. I enjoy hearing the creative renditions of the anthem, particularly at sports events. Americans generally have free rein over how they express their patriotism. My family experienced a mild cultural shock when we spotted a half-naked cowboy, wearing the U.S. flag as underwear and proudly parading his form of patriotism at Independence Day celebrations on Fourth of July. In Singapore, this would be totally unacceptable. With good humor, Americans accept and enjoy that expression of individualism and patriotism.

Americans have high ideals. They are proud of their brand of politics and their form of democracy. They see it as a superior political system that is worthy of emulation and dissemination. Hence, Americans altruistically try to promote and export American principles to the rest of the world so that other countries can be liberated from their less than ideal political structures. For instance, they are proud to have liberated Iraq from a political dictatorship and aspire to make Iraq a democracy just like the U.S. The philosophy that all men are created equal, and hence one person should have one vote, is a cornerstone



of their political landscape. In particular, Americans treasure their freedom and generally see other countries as inferior to their 'land of the free' as encapsulated in their national anthem. American patriots fight to defend that freedom, and their foreign policy seeks to advance that freedom globally. The Four Freedoms as encapsulated by President Franklin Roosevelt (U.S. President, 1933–1945) are:

*In the future days, which we seek to make secure, we look forward to a world founded upon four essential human freedoms:*

*The first is freedom of speech and expression — everywhere in the world.*

*The second is freedom of every person to worship God in his own way —anywhere in the world.*

*The third is freedom from want...*

*The fourth is freedom from fear...*

Many foreigners view Americans as having a superior mindset — not surprising, since they are the sole superpower in the world for now and at the forefront of technology. However, their sense of self-importance and self-sufficiency sometimes prevents Americans from being outward-looking and also from seeing things from the perspective of another country. This mindset is reinforced by the American media that is preoccupied with local and national news, often ignoring key events in other parts of the world. I find myself having to scan the Internet or check BBC channels to get access to international news. Initially, I was disappointed that Americans knew little about Asian countries — some thought that Singapore is part of China, Hong Kong, or Taiwan. However, I am encouraged by the fact that Americans are curious and prepared to listen when I describe Singapore to them. A plus point about living in the Washington, D.C.

area is that there are many new immigrants from different countries, and the locals are used to encountering foreigners like me.

## RIGHTS OF THE INDIVIDUAL

Americans place great value on the individual and his individual rights. There is a deep sense of the potential greatness of a single person and the difference that can make to society. The individual is seen as an intelligent being who is well able to contribute to the good of the community. President Theodore Roosevelt (U.S. President, 1901–1909) said this:

*The first requisite of a good citizen...is that he shall be able and willing to pull his weight.*

Sometimes, inordinate resources are deployed just to cater to the rights or needs of one individual. You may recall the case of an American boy living in Singapore, Michael Fay, who had committed vandalism offences and was sentenced to several strokes of the cane. This case caught the attention of the watchdog American media, resulting in a public outcry in the U.S., and President Clinton intervened to request for a lighter sentence. In response, the Singapore government reduced the sentence but there was discomfort among Singaporeans that the U.S. President should intervene in this case. I think the general feeling among Singaporeans is that if a Singaporean were sentenced in the U.S. for violating U.S. rules, we would respect the house rules of the country. The offending Singaporean might even be censured by other Singaporeans for disgracing the nation by misbehaving abroad. To me, this incident highlighted a key difference in the cultures — pre-eminence is given to the individual in the U.S. while in Singapore and

many Asian countries, the community is pre-eminent and if need be, individual rights should be sacrificed for the common good.

On a lighter note, here is a hilarious parody of the Bill of Rights by Burger King that I found at one of its outlets (more information on the Bill of Rights, that enshrines the rights of the individual, in Chapter 10):

### **Burger King Bill Of Rights**

*You have the right to have things your way. You have the right to hold the pickles and hold the lettuce. You have the right to mix Coke and Sprite. You have the right to a WHOPPER sandwich with extra tomato, extra onion and triple cheese. You have the right to have that big meal sleepy feeling when you're finished. You have the right to put a paper crown on your head and pretend you're the ruler of '\_\_\_\_\_'* (your make-believe kingdom here). *You have the right to have your chicken fire grilled or fried. You have the right to dip your fries in ketchup, mayonnaise, BBQ sauce, or mustard. Or not. You have the right to laugh until soda explodes from your nose. You have the right to stand up and fight for what you believe in. You have the right to sit down and do nothing. You have the right to eat a hot and juicy fire-grilled burger prepared just the way you like. You have the right to crumple this Bill of Rights into a ball and shoot hoops with it.*



## **U.S. WORK CULTURE**

A diminutive woman, elegantly dressed and friendly, flashed me a warm smile and invited me to her office for the interview. She introduced herself as the Branch Manager, and I explained that I would like to work in a part-time capacity because of my kids' schedule. I thought the next part of my explanation would be tough — I did not have a social security card or a work authorization permit but I would be able to get hold of these documents if I could get a written job offer. Surprisingly, I breezed through this portion; like me, the Branch Manager had been a diplomat's wife too and had gone through postings in Vietnam and France. Hence, she knew about the reciprocal arrangements between U.S. and other countries. She barely glanced at the documents I shoved in front of her which explained Singapore's reciprocal arrangement with the U.S. that allowed wives of Singapore diplomats to work in the U.S. (in turn, Singapore allows the wives of U.S. diplomats to work in Singapore). Phew! I got the job.

For a few weeks prior to this interview, I have been desperately scanning the newspapers for positions that are suitable for me. After enjoying my freedom from work for more than a year, I was getting bored with cocktail parties, shopping, lunching with other ladies of leisure, cooking, housework, and minding the kids. Restless and curious about the American work culture, I was particularly interested in working for a big American company, since U.S. multinational corporations dominate the world economy. I chanced upon this job in the classified ads and was fortunate to be given a part-time administrative job at a Fortune 500 company and had the chance to observe first-hand the U.S. work culture. It was an answer to prayer.

On our second posting, my husband works for a distinguished American boss who has retired from a senior post with the Federal Government. Through his interactions with Americans on a daily basis, my husband is able to provide me with keen insights on the U.S. working environment.

## RESUME ON COMPETENCE AND EXPERIENCE

An impressive resume is essential — it should cogently sell your abilities by highlighting key achievements, your work experience, training courses, and education. Having connections is a plus and may well help you to get your foot into the door. Many job seekers start building up their resume during the high school years. College students typically seek internships during summer breaks that can contribute to their job search later. My daughter, who is interested in medical research, decided to get a head start in building up her resume by doing an internship with a biomedical lab in Singapore during the summer of her junior year (11<sup>th</sup> grade, JC 1 equivalent). She also managed to secure an internship with the National Institutes of Health, a world-famous research institute. In the Washington, D.C. area, there are many avenues for internships as it is an economically vibrant area fueled by many federal contracts.

An intern is usually a student or new graduate seeking work experience. Many interns work practically for free, particularly for prestigious internships that would look good on a resume — this includes working for federal agencies such as Congress, Senate, or NASA (National Aeronautics and Space Administration). Some interns may receive meager allowances for transport and meals. Many interns are made to do mundane duties such as photocopying,

running errands, or taking minutes. There are even internships for those considering mid-career changes. Maybe for some corporations, interns are free labor!

## INFORMAL WORK ENVIRONMENT

I am fascinated by the informality of the American work environment, having come from a more formal environment in Singapore. The first name is usually used instead of the formal Mr. or Ms. So-and-So. The casual vocabulary and tone of voice is markedly different from what I was used to in Singapore offices. There is a good deal of humorous bantering in the office, which I find appealing as it lightens up the office atmosphere. When my office was faltering in terms of sales figures, my Branch Manager jokingly told me to pray — “Hey, you are probably closer to the guy up there than us.” This perception arose because my resume included a testimonial from my kind Pastor who vouched for my integrity of character. In their business dealings, Americans prefer a relaxed setting and use humor deftly to dispel discomfort. My husband has the utmost respect for his boss who is adept at using humor to ensure that business discussions proceed and end on a positive note with smiling faces all around.

## AMERICANS WORK HARD

*I don't pity any man who does hard work worth doing. I admire him. I pity the creature who does not work, at whichever end of the social scale he may regard himself as being.*

— President Theodore Roosevelt, U.S. President (1901–1909)

Americans have a huge capacity for hard work, driven by their desire to achieve the American dream. They are convinced that achieving greatness or attaining their goals is possible if they are willing to work for it. My husband was pleasantly surprised to find that his contacts at the Pentagon start work early in the morning, about 7:30 a.m. One of my co-workers (Americans seldom use the term ‘colleagues’) would leave her house for the office at 4:00 a.m. every morning, as it is a long commute for her, from Virginia to Maryland. My neighbor, who stays in Rockville but works near Baltimore, heads for the office at 6:00 a.m. in the morning so that she can be home by 3 p.m. at the same time that her kids get off school. There is more flexibility at the workplace in terms of working hours. My co-worker was able to start work at 5:00 a.m. and leave at 2:00 p.m., even though our boss typically arrived at the office at 9:00 a.m. The honor code that I mentioned in Chapter 2 comes into play — my boss trusted that my co-worker did indeed start work at 5:00 a.m. I am impressed by the fact that the huge supermarkets such as Giant and Safeway open at 6:00 a.m. and close at midnight — long opening hours. Some Americans in the lower income strata hold two or three jobs to make ends meet. Many refer to these work ethics as Bible-based Protestant work ethics — I am reminded of Proverbs 6 where sluggards are admonished and the diligence of an indefatigable ant is lauded:

*Take a lesson from the ants, you lazybones. Learn from their ways and become wise! Though they have no prince or governor or ruler to make them work, they labor hard all summer, gathering food for the winter.*

## DO NOT DISCRIMINATE

American companies strive to be impartial and free from prejudice in their dealings. Any form of prejudice is considered unacceptable in the American work culture. There seems to be a genuine attempt to treat all employees fairly and ensure that written procedures/instructions apply to all equally. This principle is enshrined in the U.S. Constitution:

*We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.*

— The Declaration of Independence, July 4, 1776, written by Thomas Jefferson (U.S. President, 1801–1809)

U.S. companies are careful not to discriminate in their hiring of employees. They are not allowed to ask for personal information such as age, gender, race, or marital status. Hence such information is not required in U.S. resumes. However, it may be possible to deduce such information from the name or photo. While open discrimination is not allowed, sometimes there is subtle discrimination. When I first started work with a Fortune 500 company, the Branch Manager resigned and they were interviewing for a new Branch Manager. They interviewed various candidates from different ethnic backgrounds. I noticed that preferential treatment was subtly given to white Americans. They were offered coffee while a non-white interviewee was not even offered a drink. From a comment made by one of my co-workers, I gathered that this position would not go to a colored person. The company did eventually hire a white lady for the post.

Many U.S. companies ensure that male and female employees have equal opportunities. For instance, all employees should have equal access to training and promotion as well as equal welfare benefits. Though I have observed subtle forms of discrimination, I am sure that there will be a hue and cry if they are found out. Despite the principle of equality, many American women still feel that they face glass ceilings in their quest for advancement in their careers. I once remarked to a female neighbor that American workplaces are considerate towards the needs of working mothers such as allowing for flexible time schedules. However she disagreed, saying that only the bigger companies are more sympathetic. She quit her job because her employer was not understanding about her childcare needs. Sometimes she got into office late, as there was a delay in her daughter's school bus; she was upset at the snide remarks that she should be in the office punctually at 8:30 a.m. Despite this negative example, I feel that women in American have a lot more going for them in terms of equal opportunities, compared to the status of women in other countries.

## BE POLITICALLY CORRECT

There is a preoccupation with sounding politically correct in the office. Americans try to be sensitive to the feelings of others and not hurt those feelings through inappropriate words. Certain terms are considered correct and other terms may raise eyebrows. Americans do not like words that appear discriminatory and derogatory. I was shocked that an aide to the Mayor of Washington, D.C. lost his job because he used the word 'niggardly.' He used it in a grammatically correct way, meaning 'miserly or stingy' but there was a public uproar because 'niggardly' is phonetically similar to 'nigger,' an offensive

reference to an African American. He was chided as being insensitive, and he resigned.

A friend, who works in Human Resources, told me that the 'deaf' person is more correctly referred to as 'hearing impaired' and the blind as 'visually impaired.' Americans are careful to show respect for the individual and not to define the person by his circumstances; instead of referring to the 'retrenched person,' it is deemed more politically correct to say the 'person who is affected by retrenchment' (though this term is quite a mouthful). Americans prefer to use gender-neutral terms so as not to offend females — 'chairperson' is a better term than 'chairman.' Jokes about ethnic or sexual stereotypes are definitely off-limits. It is also important to use correct terms to describe race (more in Chapter 9 Racial Sensitivities).

## STATE YOUR VIEWS

Americans generally value independent opinions and candor in the workplace. At business meetings as well as casual work discussions, it is common to find people openly disagreeing with one another. While Asians can be reticent in expressing their opinions, Americans tend to be outspoken and vocal. I think there is more room in the U.S. to disagree with what the boss says. Initially, I was taken aback by the vehemence of the difference in opinions. Later, I realized that voicing dissenting views is not necessarily a sign of disrespect (though I think the tone of voice and the demeanor do matter). Usually co-workers do not harbor ill feelings towards others who respectfully disagree with them. Issues are treated impersonally and disagreeing on subjects does not mean that you have anything personal against your co-worker. This is a stark contrast to the way Asian cultures



work — open disagreements are to be avoided and any dissent should be done subtly and indirectly.

## CHANGE JOBS

Americans revel in the mobility they have in the job market. It is common for employees to change jobs when a promising opportunity presents itself. Usually, employees are not bothered by the concept of loyalty to their current company when considering a job change. Very often, changing jobs involves relocating to a different city or state since the U.S. is a huge country with a myriad of opportunities in many different locales. My former landlord works with Nissan and his job meant that he had to live in Michigan, the heartland of the automobile industry, even though he was brought up in the Washington, D.C. area and his family is in this area. Another friend relocated his family to Seattle for five years for work reasons; eventually he came back to Washington, D.C. as he wanted to be near family and was also more comfortable with the racial diversity in this area. The American employee tends to be a go-getter — they go where their skills are needed, and where they can maximize their benefits. I think the ability of workers to move unhindered, across such a large geographical span, makes for the famed efficiency of the American corporation.

## HIRE AND FIRE

What I find a little disconcerting about American corporations is their ease in hiring and firing. The positive outcome is that the company does not carry any dead wood unlike some Asian set-ups where jobs

are guaranteed for life, and company loyalty as well as seniority in the workplace is highly valued. However, I am uncomfortable that there seems to be a certain ruthlessness about the efficiency of the American workplace. An employee who is not performing may be asked to go at short notice. During my stint in the Fortune 500 Company, I witnessed my Branch Manager firing an executive and replacing her with someone she was accustomed to working with. A few months later, I was somewhat startled when the Branch Manager herself was fired unceremoniously after only 10 months on the job, because she was unable to deliver the sales figures.

## TAX DEDUCTIONS

The American tax system is complicated, and you will probably pay more taxes here. On average, there are deductions of about 25% to 30% from your pay. The deductions are for Federal Income Tax, State Income Tax, Social Security, and Medicare. The U.S. practices tax withholding i.e., your employer is required to deduct the taxes upfront from your salary. This is unlike Singapore where we only settle our taxes at the end of the tax year. The law requires 6.2% deduction for Social Security, and your employer contributes a matching amount. For Medicare, the deduction is 1.45% and your employer matches that amount too. Medicare is a Federal insurance health plan that those aged 65 and above can benefit from. Social Security is essentially a trust fund that pays out benefits mainly for retirees and the disabled. When you work and contribute to Social Security, you accumulate credits that entitle you for these benefits (only for U.S. citizens and permanent residents). My husband and I go to H&R Block (tax consultants) to get help to do our taxes while some of our friends use software such as Turbo Tax. Do not be surprised if you are able

to get substantial tax refunds from both the state government and federal government, as the withholding taxes deducted from your salary usually exceed your tax liabilities.

## WORK-LIFE BALANCE

What I like about the American workplace is the work-life balance. There is a time for serious work and time for leisure — this promotes family relationships and overall health. As written in Ecclesiastes in the Bible, “For everything there is a season, a time for every activity under heaven.” So, even as Americans slave at their jobs, they play equally hard. Americans value their leisure time and like having a life after work — they love talking about weekend adventures and their hobbies. Weekends are almost sacred and are not to be spent working in the office. Bosses do expect you to enjoy yourself after work and during weekends. It is unusual for my husband’s boss to call him during weekends. On the rare occasions that it happened, his boss graciously prefaced his call with an apology for intruding into his weekend. Similarly, when my husband needed to make urgent calls to his co-workers during weekends, he would apologize for disturbing them during their personal time. That is a healthy approach to work and play. By observing these boundaries, employees are able to plan for leisure activities and end up being refreshed during weekends. This translates to resilient employees who are mentally and emotionally healthy, and not easily burnt out.



## CREATIVE EDUCATION

“Mommy, look I’ve got 105 out of 100 marks for my spelling test today!” How is that possible? The U.S. education system sometimes allows for bonus marks, or extra credit, for those who want to go above and beyond.

“Mommy, the chicks hatched today, the chicks hatched today, they really did!” my daughter cried excitedly during an eventful day in kindergarten. I was amazed that my 6-year-old daughter became exposed to the wonders of biology that early in her U.S. education.

“Daddy, my teacher says that the answer to that Math question is that there isn’t an answer!” This was an eye-opener as I was used to an education system where every question has an answer, and usually just one standard answer is accepted as correct.

We had an academic cultural shock when our kids started their education in the U.S. — my son was 10 years old and my daughter was six. Being young, they adapted well — no assessment papers to mull over and no exams at the elementary level for the private schools that they were in. A big positive is that we did not have to spend time and money on tutoring, as it is easier to get As in the U.S. especially at the lower grades.

School is more fun in the U.S. The teachers are more affirmative and encouraging. On his first day at school, my son asked to be excused from class to go to the restroom and was pleasantly surprised when



the teacher cheerfully gave permission. Being a mischievous boy, he is used to teachers being suspicious of his antics — going to the restroom sometimes means a splashing water party and Singapore teachers are wary of that!

It was easier for my kids to move from a rigorous and strict school environment in Singapore to the U.S. school environment, which is more accommodating of different levels of academic achievement. My kids excelled in the five different schools they attended over a span of 10 years. They got into the Honors Roll, the Principal's List, and into advanced level classes. This is typical of most Singapore kids who join U.S. schools. They are used to a tougher academic system, and so they flourish in a relatively less demanding system. Another plus factor is that Singapore kids are already fluent in English so they do not have a problem with language. Singapore kids also do well because of the phenomena of 'hovering' parents. Like many Asian parents in the U.S., I was intimately involved in the academics of the kids — I made it clear to my children that I expected them to be seriously committed to their studies and to strive for excellent results. Half-jokingly, I told my kids that the word 'pass' should not be in their vocabulary and that the key word was 'score' not 'pass.'

However, it would be erroneous to paint a picture that the U.S. education system is not challenging. The environment in the well-reputed U.S. schools is highly competitive. Kids are encouraged to get into advanced level classes and to do work that is 'above grade level.' For instance, it means that 1<sup>st</sup> grade kids do Mathematics that is meant for 2<sup>nd</sup> or even 3<sup>rd</sup> grade kids. The big positive is that the A grade is not elusive — if the kids work hard and are reasonably intelligent, they will make the grade especially at the elementary levels. In high school (Secondary 3 to JC 2), it is more difficult to get

straight As particularly if the kids are taking university level classes (referred to as Advanced Placement courses). Consistent work is essential in the U.S. school system — my kids lamented that they could not slack for months and then study furiously towards the end of the year — it does not work that way in the U.S. since the grades in most assignments and tests contribute to the final grade.

I like the way the U.S. system prepares my kids for the real world. What I value most is that it develops thinking kids who are open to ideas outside the box while the Singapore system tends to produce more dependent and conforming kids, albeit extremely diligent and exam-smart students. A key drawback is that the U.S. Mathematics curriculum is not as rigorous as Singapore's. Singapore Mathematics is legendary for its rigor, and there are many school systems in the U.S. that have incorporated the curriculum and made vast improvements in their scores. We are proud of that!

Elementary schools cater to 1<sup>st</sup> grade to 5<sup>th</sup> grade (equivalent of our Primary 1 to Primary 5). Middle schools are typically 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grades (corresponding with our Primary 6, Secondary 1 and 2) while high schools cover 9<sup>th</sup> grade to 12<sup>th</sup> grade (our Secondary 3 and 4, JC 1 and 2). The 9<sup>th</sup> grade is also referred to as freshman year, 10<sup>th</sup> grade as sophomore, 11<sup>th</sup> grade as junior year, and 12<sup>th</sup> grade as senior year. (For universities, the four years of study are also similarly referred to as freshman, sophomore, junior, and senior years.) For the pre-school kids, the U.S. system has pre-nursery, nursery, pre-kindergarten and kindergarten classes. There are some excellent private Montessori schools in this area that cater to pre-schoolers. For the public school system, only some schools offer nursery classes for 3-year-olds, and most schools start at the kindergarten level.

It was a major decision deciding on schools for our two kids. As we reside in an academically vibrant region in the greater Washington, D.C. area, there is a wide array of schools to choose from. It was a maze trying to negotiate our way in the educational territory. We considered both public schools and private schools.

## PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SCHOOLS

Public schools are funded mainly by the government and are free — no school fees, no supplementary fees, free textbooks, no expensive uniforms needed (wear your home clothes), and no payments needed for the school bus! (I like that!) There are even subsidized breakfasts and lunches for students from lower income families. Public schools operate on a regional zoning system where your residence determines which school your kids are zoned into. Hence, when parents look for houses, they are always interested in the quality of public schools serving that residential area. The schools are arranged in a cluster — elementary schools feed into the middle schools that in turn channel their students into a high school. For my residence in the town of Potomac in Maryland, we are zoned into Bells Mill Elementary School and then Herbert Hoover Middle School, followed by Winston Churchill High School.

We are glad that the public schools in our area are reputed to be among the best in the country. However, the quality of the different schools is not homogenous so it is wise to check out various schools. The resources available to a school depends on its locality — an affluent neighborhood tends to have better facilities and programs as the property taxes of the higher-value residences help fund the public schools in the area.

Private schools, also referred to as independent schools, are rather expensive in this area. Depending on the grade and school, annual school fees (referred to as tuition) can run up to US\$30,000. That is astronomical by Singapore standards! The admission process can be complicated since well-reputed private schools are selective and would only admit students who are high-achievers. To be admitted, the child has to submit school transcripts from the previous and current schools, go for an intensive IQ-type test, submit standardized test scores such as the SSAT (Secondary School Admission Test), or sit for other placement tests. The older kids are also assessed via an interview while the younger kids may be observed during a play date at the school where they interact with existing students.

Some of the factors we considered in our school search are:

**Academics** — U.S. schools are ranked by various agencies. Check out websites such as [www.psk12.com](http://www.psk12.com) for public schools and [www.greatschools.net](http://www.greatschools.net) for both public and private schools.

**Diversity** — Asian kids tend to fit in better at a school that has a diversified student body, which may include other Asians, whites, Hispanics, and African-Americans.

**Foreign Language Teaching** — usually Spanish and French are offered; a handful of schools offer Chinese, Latin, and other languages.

**Accelerated Programs** — many schools allow kids to move at a faster pace; if they excel in Mathematics, English, Science, or a foreign language, they can be placed in gifted and talented programs (also known as honors or advanced classes in some schools). Some schools

offer prep classes for IB (International Baccalaureate), and some offer specialized studies known as magnet programs for high achievers.

**Advanced Placement (AP)** — for high schools, it is important that the school offers a range of AP courses as these are university-level subjects that can be converted into credits in university and more importantly, prepares the child for university.

## OUR DECISION

It was a dilemma for us, deciding on whether public or private schools are best for our children. We visited many schools and a key factor that influenced our decision was a conversation with a school counselor in a public school — she told us that even though she works in a well-reputed public school, she has decided to educate her kids in a private school. She hinted that it is inevitable that there will be gangs, smoking, and drugs in public schools, though it is not a pervasive problem in good public schools. I was alarmed and finally decided to enroll our two young kids in a small private Christian school. I had to send the kids for IQ tests — the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children (WISC). The kids were exhausted by the 3-hour long IQ tests that assessed them on many skills such as oral vocabulary, arithmetic, social judgment, memory, and visual-motor processing speed. We were also required to provide school transcripts from their previous schools. After clearing those hurdles, both of them were interviewed by the Principal and then offered admission. Phew! It was quite a process.

What I like about this private Christian school (Grace Episcopal Day School) is the discipline and religious values that the school instills in the kids. The small school setting attracted me as well. In my opinion,

kids tend to develop well in smaller classes in their early years of education and benefit from a closer relationship with their teachers. For my kids, their class sizes ranged from 12 to 16 students. I was pleasantly surprised at the small class size — what a contrast to the 40 students in my son's primary school class in Singapore. The kids thrived well in the school where the principal and all their subject teachers knew them by name. I felt the warmth and intimacy of the small school setting as the principal and teachers also knew who I was whenever I visited the school. I must qualify that while many private schools are smaller than public schools, there are also some bigger private schools that have a huge enrollment of students and may cater to all the grades, from Nursery to 12<sup>th</sup> grade.

My daughter eventually went to public schools from 7<sup>th</sup> grade to 12<sup>th</sup> grade. It was a big adjustment for her and for me. However I was surprised when she told me that I should have sent her to a public school from the beginning! She likes having friends in the neighborhood and likes the fact that there are many Asian kids in her school. In her previous school, her classmates live in different cities so they do not get to meet often for play dates after school. A big advantage of being in a public school is that all her classmates live in the vicinity, and we get to be more immersed in the community where we live. I also had more opportunities to meet other parents as all of us live in the same residential area.

In contrast to private Christian schools, which emphasize Biblical values, public schools are secular in orientation. The schools tend to be bigger and more impersonal. I continue to be somewhat worried about the possible negatives such as smoking, drugs, and guns in public schools. To minimize these problems, we chose to reside in the city of Potomac as it has some of the top schools in the U.S. A big plus is the abundant resources in the public school system which

enable the kids to be exposed to a wider range of enrichment activities including band, orchestra, drama, chess clubs, and the like. If your child has special needs and learning disabilities such as dyslexia and autism, public schools are the way to go as they are better equipped to cater to such needs.

Besides the wide array of extra-curricular school activities available in the middle and high school years, there is an impressive range of academic subjects offered in public schools. This is especially important in the high school years as my daughter could choose to study different AP classes. Another advantage is that my daughter is exposed to a more diverse social and cultural environment that is more reflective of the real world. This is in stark contrast to a private school setting where the child tends to be cocooned in an exclusive environment that is mainly upper middle class.

## STRENGTHS OF THE U.S. SCHOOL SYSTEM

I have watched my kids go through almost the entire spectrum of the U.S. education system — my daughter started in Kindergarten and completed 12<sup>th</sup> grade in May 2010. My son had a shorter stint in the U.S. education system — he went through 5<sup>th</sup> grade to 9<sup>th</sup> grade and then four years of university. From helping them with homework and interacting with their teachers in school, I have come to appreciate the strengths of the U.S. system.

My kids learnt to be more articulate and to participate actively in classroom learning. I was surprised that Daphne was assessed on her public speaking skills in Kindergarten! There is a class activity called ‘Show and Tell’ where she has to bring an object and talk about it in front of her class. She brought a favorite soft toy to school, a brown

pudgy bear. She related that her Daddy had bought her the toy bear in California and explained why she liked the bear. Her classmates then had a chance to ask her questions about the bear. She came home with an assessment slip:

*Daphne shared today and remembered to:*

*Speak loudly enough*

*Speak clearly*

*Hold items in sight (toy, book, poster, etc)*

*Stand still*

*Look at the audience*

Initially, the teacher commented that Daphne was too quiet and needed to speak up more in class. Through the years, I could see that she has become more confident about speaking in front of her class or an audience. The U.S. school system trains Americans to be comfortable behind a lectern. I also observed that her American friends tend to be confident and assertive. On one occasion, Daphne’s 7-year old American friend came over for a play date, and I decided to order pizza for dinner. The little girl told me that she only liked white pizza (i.e., pizza without any tomato sauce) and that she usually ate two slices of pizza. Initially, I was a little taken aback at her request as I expected my kids to eat whatever was offered to them by their hosts instead of boldly requesting that their food taste be accommodated. I later learnt that being outspoken about your preferences is very much a part of the American culture.

The American system emphasizes broad-based learning and exposes the students to a wide range of topics instead of going in-depth into particular subjects. Because of that, it is sometimes perceived to be

less vigorous than some Asian systems. My son commented that for Mathematics, he had to cover a lot more ground when he went home for Secondary 3 and 4. At the university level, college students are expected to do a broad spectrum of subjects outside of their majors so as to achieve a good foundation in different disciplines. Though my son majored in Engineering, he did subjects such as Psychology and Architecture. The U.S. system values an all-rounded individual who has a good grasp of multi-disciplines. Americans also value students who excel not just in their academics but also in non-academic aspects such as sports, art, or music. There is sufficient latitude in the U.S. system for the student to pursue other interests besides academic work.

The U.S. system places a high premium on independent thinking. My kids were time and again encouraged to be original in their ideas and were commended for being so. Instead of rote-learning and passive acceptance of the teachers' instruction, which are prevalent in Asian societies, U.S. teachers encourage my kids to play an active role in the classroom by asking questions and giving comments. I like the fact that there is a good deal of interaction between the teachers and students. This is possible due to the smaller class sizes in the U.S. (average of 25 in public schools compared to 40 in Singapore) as well as the pre-disposition of the teachers.

I like the emphasis on science in U.S. schools. My daughter had science lessons in Kindergarten — their science project appealed to young 6-year-old kids as they observed the incubation of chicks for a few months and the highlight was seeing the chicks hatch almost literally before their eyes! The teacher then took a photo of each kid holding a chick and that was priceless! My kids get to work on projects for Science Fairs. The Science Fair is a big event in the U.S. system. I have gone to various Science Fairs and it was an eye opener for me to see the myriad of science projects that they do. The students stood

beside their displays and were expected to answer questions from students and parents who viewed their exhibits. The U.S. system is governed by pragmatism — students tend to work on projects that are oriented towards practical down-to-earth issues affecting their daily lives. For instance, I saw a project that analyzed food in the school cafeteria and another project that assessed the effectiveness of fabrics in keeping us cool during the hot summer months.

I am impressed by the standard of reading in the schools. There is a huge emphasis on reading as the ability to read is closely linked to success in the other subjects. Being an English major myself, I am pleased that Literature is regarded as important (I was disappointed that some Singapore schools discourage their students from taking Literature as it is difficult to get a distinction in the 'O' and 'A' Level exams). In elementary schools, my kids were introduced to a discipline of daily reading — the school provided a chart that required them to read at least 30 minutes a day and I had to countersign that they did it. I loved that! My daughter's 1<sup>st</sup> grade teacher even placed a purple bathtub in the middle of the classroom and got the students to sit in the bathtub to read! When I helped them with spelling drills, I realized that my kids were also doing rather tough vocabulary work in school with the famed Wordly Wise series (I highly recommend it!) My daughter even got to author her own book at 3<sup>rd</sup> grade (Primary 3 equivalent). Her teacher held an Author's Tea and invited the parents to hear the budding authors read their books. Here I am, trying to author a book closer to my golden years! Attached at Appendices A and B are two poems written by Daphne, one when she was six years old and the other when she was 18.

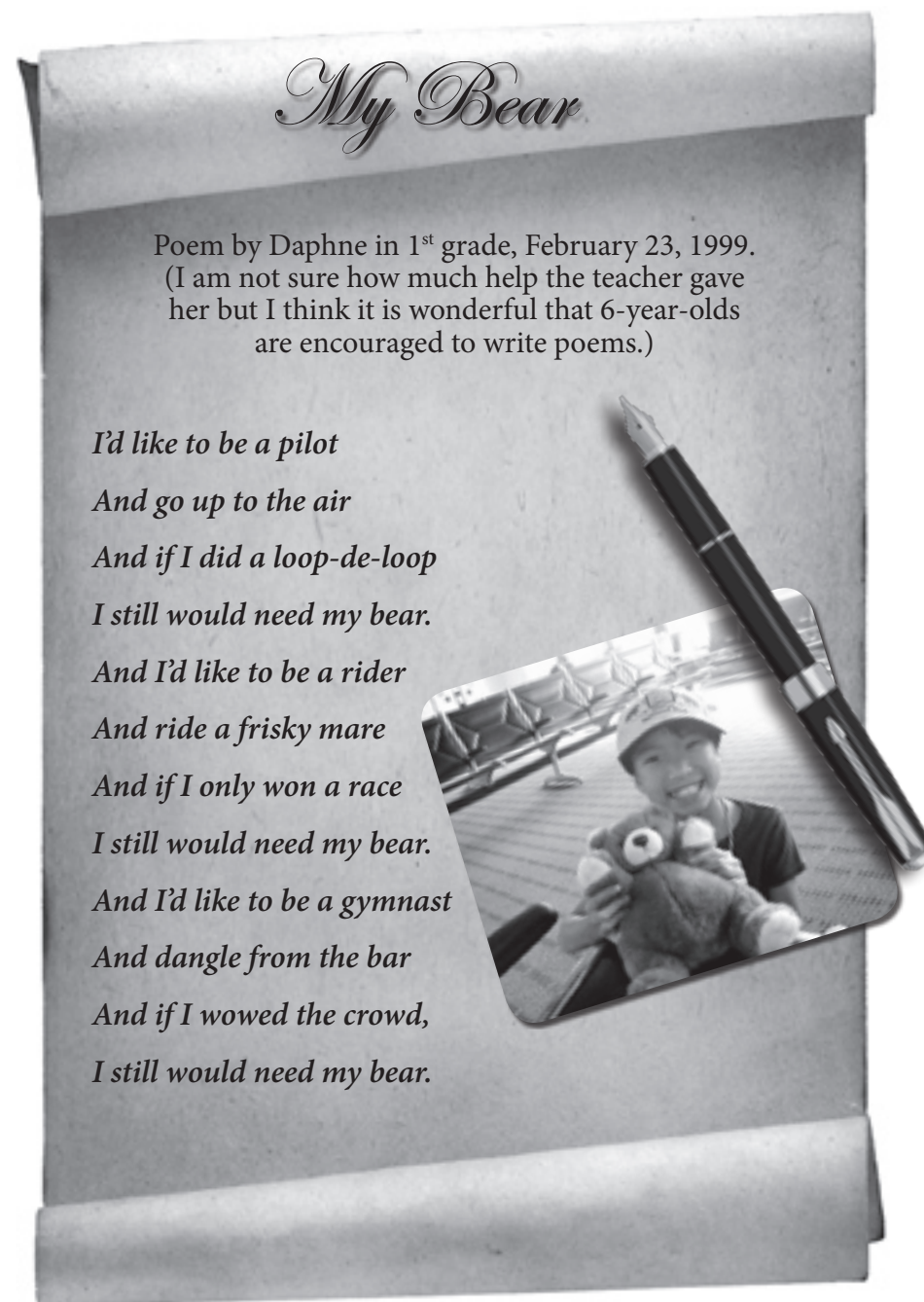
Parental involvement in the children's schooling is highly encouraged. During the start of the school year, 'Back to School' nights are held to inform parents about the curriculum and other highlights for the school year. I like the fact that I get to meet all the teachers and get



## Appendix A

a feel of who they are. I also get an overview of what they will be teaching for the entire school year. Parent-Teacher Organizations, known as PTOs, pervade the school system. A relatively powerful body, the PTO provides support for various programs — the schools take its views and recommendations seriously. Parent-teacher conferences are scheduled a few times during the school year, and parents are expected to keep a close tab on the general progress of their kids. For the Montgomery County public school system, all the assignments and grades are posted on a website and updated almost daily. I was able to access the homework requirements and grades of my daughter online and communicate with teachers via email. I like that! Many of my American friends actively monitor their child's development in school and the school curriculum. They make it a point to feedback to the school if they are dissatisfied with any aspects of their kids' education.

American parents are quick to address any learning problems that their kids may have. They take the initiative to talk to the teachers and the school counselors. Unlike the pervasive tutoring (tuition in Singapore lingo) culture in Singapore, most American kids do not have private tutors unless they have specific problems such as dyslexia or autism. There is a support system within public schools where students can get extra help with schoolwork. The teachers are available before school starts, during lunch, and sometimes after school to provide extra coaching. There is also peer tutoring — stronger students in honors societies help weaker students during the lunch hour or after school. Parent volunteers also help to play a part — through arrangements by the school counselors, I have helped some kids who were struggling with schoolwork because of language problems.



## *My Bear*

Poem by Daphne in 1<sup>st</sup> grade, February 23, 1999.  
(I am not sure how much help the teacher gave her but I think it is wonderful that 6-year-olds are encouraged to write poems.)

*I'd like to be a pilot*

*And go up to the air*

*And if I did a loop-de-loop*

*I still would need my bear.*

*And I'd like to be a rider*

*And ride a frisky mare*

*And if I only won a race*

*I still would need my bear.*

*And I'd like to be a gymnast*

*And dangle from the bar*

*And if I wowed the crowd,*

*I still would need my bear.*



## Appendix B

*The Cross*

Poem by Daphne in 12<sup>th</sup> grade, March 2010.

*I look up at the cross,  
And I can't help but wonder why someone like Him  
would ever come down to die for an imperfect girl like me.  
Someone who lies,  
Someone so unfaithful;  
Someone so fickle-minded.*

*I look up at the cross,  
This bright, white cross,  
Surrounded by blue stained glass.*

*Is it there to taunt me?  
To remind me of what I've done wrong?  
To maybe make me question who I have become?*

*I think back to what everyone else has taught me —  
that He loves me;  
that He doesn't care about what I've done;  
that He just wants me as me, just as I am.*

*I look up at the cross,  
Still wondering why someone like Him  
would ever come down to die for someone like me.*

*Maybe I should,  
instead of being so cynical,  
instead of being doubtful,  
allow some glimmer of hope.*

*Maybe this cross is there to remind me  
of the hope that I am given.  
Maybe this cross is there to remind me  
that I can change, that what I've done wrong has been forgiven and forgotten.*

*I look up at the cross,  
This bright, white cross;  
I am free.*



## 2,500 UNIVERSITIES — WHICH ONE AND HOW TO GET IN?

Many Singapore students aspire to study in the U.S. Perhaps they want exposure to a foreign university during a 'study abroad' program or would like some respite from the extreme rigor of the Singapore education system. Maybe they would like to graduate from one of the branded universities in the U.S. — having an Ivy League university on a resume is sure to attract an employer's attention. You may be a student who is heading to the U.S. to study or a concerned parent who is helping your child look for a university. From my own zealous search for universities for my son and my daughter, I have gleaned some information that can help you navigate the university maze.

I was the primary person looking for a university for my son as Jabez was in Singapore doing his GCE 'O' Levels when we came back to the U.S. for our second posting. Also, at 16 years old, Jabez was clueless about which university to go to and what discipline he should major in. Though he was rather young to head for university, he decided that because of National Service considerations, he would like to skip the Junior College grades (11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grades) and enroll into a university at 16. If he could get accepted into a university before 17½ years old, he would be deferred for National Service and would be able to complete his university education before serving the military. So that was how I became the key person tackling the university maze. At the time that this chapter is written, my daughter is in 12<sup>th</sup> grade (JC 2) and in the thick of college applications. So I am again confronted with the questions: which university is best for Daphne, and how can she maximize her chances of getting admitted?



Coming from a small city-state where there are only a handful of universities, it is overwhelming to have about 2,500 universities to choose from in the U.S. The Ivy Leagues (or Ivies) are the universities of choice for top American students and foreign students. Many Singaporeans, especially those on government scholarships, head for coveted institutions such as Columbia University, Cornell, Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Brown, Dartmouth, Duke, and University of Pennsylvania. Besides the Ivies in the northeastern part of the U.S., there are a host of other reputable universities such as Stanford University, UCLA (University of California, Los Angeles), Berkeley, and University of Michigan, which may be more highly ranked than some Ivies. In my diligent search for a university, I attended talks, visited various campuses, went to the libraries, bookshops, and checked the Internet. I checked out the annual rankings of the top universities by the U.S. News and World Report as well as reports by The Princeton Review. There is fierce competition for the college rankings as it translates into attracting top students (who continue to enhance the school's reputation) and tuition dollars. Americans are obsessed with rankings, and there are even books that rank the rankings! What I like about the U.S. is the abundance of information available though I am often swarmed by the sheer amount of data. For me, the more useful resources are publications by The Princeton Review and College Board.

In the greater Washington, D.C. area, there are many choice universities available. I was initially confused about the distinction between a college and a university. I learnt that a college tends to be a smaller institution that offers undergraduate courses leading to a Bachelor's degree and some colleges offer limited graduate degrees as

well. A university refers to a larger institution that offers Bachelor's degrees and a wide range of postgraduate degrees (Masters and PhDs). There is also a distinction between public and private universities. Public or state universities receive government funding, and hence tuition fees tend to be lower. They are usually larger institutions. Private universities and colleges are the opposite — smaller and more costly.

## CHOOSING A UNIVERSITY

I was concerned with selecting a university that is accredited. My kids may eventually go back to Singapore, and their degrees should be well-recognized. Accreditation is mainly done by regional associations though there is also accreditation by programs (e.g., business school, engineering school). Universities in Washington, D.C., Maryland, and Pennsylvania are accredited to the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools (see [www.msache.org](http://www.msache.org)). Even for Americans, it is important to ensure that the college is accredited as the degrees conferred are generally more recognized within the U.S. as well as in other countries. Furthermore, it is easier to transfer the credits from one accredited university to another. In the U.S., it is common for college students to transfer from one college to another. Some attend a 2-year community college and then transfer to a four-year college; others transfer from one 4-year college to another. More information about U.S. accreditation can be found at <http://ope.ed.gov/accreditation>. For those interested in joining the Singapore Civil Service, the Public Service Commission takes the position that a U.S. degree is recognized if it is accredited by the U.S.

government. For professional qualifications such as law, accountancy and engineering, the foreign degrees must also be recognized by the relevant professional bodies in Singapore.

It is prudent to check the rankings of the colleges and the courses that the universities are well reputed for. In the Washington, D.C. area, the University of Maryland, where my son eventually studied in, is well ranked for its engineering and business courses. Georgetown University is particularly well known for studies in international relations and medicine. University of Virginia is usually ranked in the top three slots for public universities and is highly reputed for many courses. Johns Hopkins is famed for its scientific research and medicine.

Tuition fees are a key concern, and this will be addressed in the subsequent paragraphs. The security situation of the campus is another key factor to consider. Many famous universities are situated in areas with high crime rates. The reason is that the universities need large plots of land to build their campus, and land is cheaper in the less desired areas. For instance, students have to be careful when driving or walking around areas near universities such as Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, the University of Maryland in College Park, and Columbia University in New York. Another factor I considered is the locality of the university. Universities in the greater Washington, D.C. area have the distinct advantage of being near the U.S. capital. This translates into exposure to the nation's decision-making processes, and also means that many interesting internships are available which could greatly bolster the resume of job seekers. Upon graduation, job seekers can explore careers in the federal

agencies, non-profit organizations funded by federal grants as well as international organizations such as the International Monetary Fund and World Bank. I am glad to be in such a vibrant area of the U.S.

## WHAT COURSE SHOULD I DO?

My advice to my kids is to follow their heart and passion, and take a course that they would be interested in studying. Secondly, they need to be governed by pragmatic considerations. At the back of their minds, they should be aware of the job scope for that particular discipline and select a major that would enable them to find a job easily. My dolphin-lover daughter wanted to be a marine biologist but my husband and I discouraged her from pursuing that as a career since job openings are extremely limited for that kind of degree (considering that there is only one dolphin lagoon in Singapore). Thirdly, they should choose a major that is well ranked at the universities they are looking at. Some of the course rankings are available at [www.usnews.com](http://www.usnews.com). It is important to consider both the overall ranking of the university and the ranking of the particular disciplines they wish to pursue.

It was difficult helping my son decide what to major in. After much deliberation, my son applied to major in Journalism at the University of Maryland. There were a few considerations that influenced this decision. Journalism seems like a good stepping-stone to a public relations career that my son thought he was well suited for. The Philip Merrill School of Journalism has a good reputation. Anyway, during our discussions with university officials, we were assured that it is common for undergraduates to change their minds about their

majors and it is easy to switch to a different discipline. A word of caution about changing majors: some students change their majors too late in the day and find that they may have to spend more time and money on an extra semester or extra year if they do not have enough credits to graduate in the major that they finally decided on.

A few weeks later, after having been accepted by the University of Maryland to major in Journalism, my son changed his mind. He decided that since his boyhood dream was to be a pilot, he would like to major in Aeronautical Engineering. True to what we had been advised, he had no problems changing his major to Aerospace/Aeronautical Engineering. We are thankful that this particular major is offered at the University of Maryland as it is rather specialized and not offered at many smaller institutions. Furthermore, the undergraduate program at the James Clark School of Engineering is known for its excellence.

## HOW MUCH DOES IT COST?

The cost of tuition is a big factor to consider and varies greatly. At a private university, such as Georgetown University, tuition is steep, about US\$40,000 per year. Include living expenses (dormitory and meal plans) of about US\$10,000, and the bill amounts to US\$50,000. At a public university, such as University of Maryland, it is half the price, about US\$26,000. These figures include tuition fees of US\$18,000 and room and board (that is dormitory and meal expenses) for US\$8,000. For my son, we paid in-state tuition as we are residents of Maryland who pay income taxes and property taxes. The in-state fees

are heavily discounted — tuition is US\$8,000 instead of US\$18,000. Public universities, such as the University of Maryland, are funded by the state and hence able to charge a lower tuition rate compared with private universities that do not receive state funds. Even among public universities, the fees vary. I was surprised to learn that many American families are plunged into debt paying for college tuition. Sometimes, the parents co-pay with their kids. My friend took out a college loan for half the amount and his son took up a student loan for the other half. For their son who studied at Carnegie Melon, the annual tuition costs of US\$50,000 translate to an astounding total loan amount of US\$200,000 for four years. Some students end up shouldering the entire burden of their college education and would start working life steeped in debt to the tune of US\$200,000. My friend, who is a pediatrician, lamented that it would take him about 10 years to repay his college loans. Typically, college loans carry a high interest rate of about 8% or more.

## HOW TO GET IN?

Six years after guiding my son through the college admissions process, I get to handhold my daughter through a similar admission process. Applications to U.S. universities can be a minefield to negotiate. There are many requirements to be fulfilled. The basic requirement is the SAT (School Admissions Test) and school academic results. Sometimes, ACT (American College Testing) scores have to be submitted too. Some colleges require SAT II test results for the different academic subjects. Usually, one or two essays are required. Letters of recommendation from teachers and others are mandatory.

If possible, it is wise to begin the application process by visiting the universities you have short-listed. I went on several university tours and attended the briefings as well as the Question & Answer sessions. Just walking around the campus and the locale would also give you an idea whether the college is a good fit for your child. A visit to the campus counts as a positive in the admissions process as it signals to the university that you are a serious applicant.

**SAT** — the SAT score serves as a standardized nationwide test for American students since the high school examinations vary greatly in standards. American students study furiously for this test as the SAT score is seen to define a student academically. Many spend thousands of dollars for preparation courses — for instance, my American friend rationalized that the SAT is worth a US\$1,000 investment as it would determine her daughter's career path as a doctor; her daughter aspired to go to Georgetown University's prestigious medical school. There are three components to the SAT — Critical Reading, Mathematics, and Writing. The maximum score is 2400, 800 points per component. However, since Writing is a relatively new component of the SAT, some universities do not recognize this score as it is regarded as too subjective. Most universities just require the scores of the Critical Reading and Mathematics portions. The Ivies usually require a high SAT score of 2100 and above. My son, who did his SAT when he was in Secondary 4 in Singapore did not go through a preparation course and relied solely on self study — I simply bought two thick SAT practice books for him. On hindsight, I think it is advisable to attend some preparation classes. So my daughter benefited from this hindsight, and she was sent for a reputable preparation course that she found helpful in bolstering her scores. That set us back

by about US\$1,500, and we hope to see tangible benefits from this investment!

Besides the SATs, some foreign students may need to take TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) or IELTS (International English Language Testing System). These tests are required if English is not the native language of the student, and especially if the candidate has a low score on the English Language portion of the SAT.

**Academic Results** — premier U.S. universities place a high value on academic results. The high schools compile a student's grades into a Grade Point Average (GPA) score. Students get both an unweighted and a weighted GPA score. Top universities expect sterling academic results such as a 3.8 unweighted GPA and a 4.5 weighted GPA. The universities also want to see that the student has taken challenging courses such as Advanced Placement (college level) subjects and Honors subjects — and that they do well in these subjects.

**Essay** — this can be a deciding factor in college admission. The essay topic varies for different universities. It is crucial that the university gets a sense of the unique individual that you are rather than just your writing skills. From the university tours, I gathered that the essay should convince the evaluator that the prospective student is on an upward trend in his learning curve besides just doing well academically. The essay should give indications of a maturing individual who is competent in activities outside of schoolwork. If the student is able to convey in the essay that he has the determination to do well academically and also contribute in non-academic areas, he would bolster his chances of admission. The essay should contain

information that distinguishes the student, bearing in mind that the evaluator would be inundated with a mass of essays. It should be carefully edited and devoid of careless grammar mistakes.

**Letters of Recommendation** — about three letters of recommendation is a good number to submit. A key testimonial should be from a teacher who knows the student well. Letters that carry weight include those from a pastor/clergy, sports coach (of your child's sports team), or an employer (if your child has a part-time job). My son submitted three testimonials from various teachers and a testimonial from the church pastor as well as one from a family friend who is an Associate Professor with a university. I think the five testimonials he submitted verged on overkill. For my daughter, she submitted three recommendations — from her Biology teacher (main subject), her English teacher (a core subject), and her school guidance counselor (character reference).

**Sports and CCA** — some students get into top universities based on their non-academic skills. Many high school students aspire to be skilled in sports such as football, baseball, hockey, etc. Co-Curricular Activities (CCA) may also open doors to some colleges. Daphne's friends who are good athletes have confirmed admissions to some prestigious colleges. It may be worthwhile to snoop around and find out which colleges value the skills or talents that you have. You could end up with a scholarship and go to college for free! The universities value individuals who have leadership skills and hence students who hold key positions in clubs are well regarded. Activities outside of school are also taken into account, for instance, involvement in community service and holding part-time jobs. Such activities reflect

the maturity of the student and concomitantly, their ability to cope with college life.

## HORROR STORIES OF COLLEGE KIDS

It is common to hear horror stories of college kids going wild. Underage drinking, partying, sex orgies, taking drugs, and excessive computer gaming are some of the scary stories. I was sad to learn that three of Jabez's friends were asked to leave the university because they over-indulged in computer games, and lost focus on their studies. For the University of Maryland, you need to attain a minimum GPA of 2.0 to be allowed to continue your studies. Lesser evils are college kids surviving on a bad diet of junk food and on energy drinks during the examination period. When I went college visiting, some colleges tried to assure us that they have a menu system that encourages college kids to eat healthily. My friend's daughter was distraught after she found out that her college roommate had a boyfriend who slept over in the dorm, and both of them engaged in intimate activities despite her presence in the room. I had a cultural shock when my son told me that in his co-ed dorm, the students are allowed to have one friend (can be male or female) sleeping over in their dorm room at any one time. Drinking is common on campuses even though it is illegal. Unlike in Singapore where the drinking age is 18, it is illegal to consume alcohol in the U.S. till you are 21 years old. My son, who was a Resident Assistant in his dorm, had to call the ambulance in when a dorm-mate drank excessively and passed out. It is not uncommon to have college friends who take drugs. As a Resident Assistant, my son was trained to identify drug odors along the dorm corridors, and took a whiff of marijuana as part of his training.



## GRADUATE STUDIES

In the Washington, D.C. area, many college graduates eventually pursue postgraduate studies. For many middle class Americans, there is a usual progression of completing their Bachelor's degrees, garnering some work experience, and then pursuing postgraduate studies. Many jobs in this area require a postgraduate degree. The criteria for admission to graduate programs vary. Those applying to graduate schools are required to take the examinations such as GRE (Graduate Record Examination). For those seeking MBA (Masters of Business Administration), they need to take the GMAT (Graduate Management Admission Test). Graduate schools are ranked annually by various organizations, including the U.S. News & World Report. For the greater Washington area, the business schools in the University of Virginia, University of Maryland, and Georgetown University have good rankings.

## COLLEGE KIDS AND THE EMPTY NEST

Teenagers moving away from the confines of home to a college (sometimes far away) is a well-documented American phenomenon. Parents who have college kids learn to cope with an empty nest. After being so involved in the lives of their kids, parents suddenly awaken to the fact that their nestling has left the security of the nest and may never come home again except for visits. My American friend became depressed when she went on college visits with her son. She lamented that since he has decided to go to Ohio for college, he might work there after graduation, and might also marry and settle in Ohio. She

commented that, in the U.S., parents only have their kids for 18 years. This is unlike Singapore, where our kids live with us until they get married, usually for a good 25 years. My friend's anguish left a chilling effect on me as well. I was fortunate that I got to touch base with my son during the weekends since it took only 40 minutes to drive to the University of Maryland. Jabez stayed on campus but would usually come home on Fridays and return to campus on Sundays. Another American friend looked at her college kids differently — her son would be going to college about an hour away from home but she wished that he had gone further afield. Her instructions to him were to carve out an independent life for himself now that he is in college and not to come home during the weekends. Another American friend converted her son's room into a guest room when he left for college. Apparently, she was sending him a signal that he needed to find his own niche outside the family home. I guess all kinds of moms make up this world!





▲ Our surrogate family in America celebrates with us during Jabez's graduation (graduate on the left), and we celebrate with Young Ern's family too (at University of Maryland).

Americans love hiking in parks in gorgeous weather. ▶



▶ The autumn scenery is legendary in Vermont.



▶ Pets, especially dogs, are treasured in America (our Sweet Pea is at the extreme left).

▶ Like many American families, we visited several colleges, including Duke University in North Carolina, to help Daphne decide on her college choice.



▶ In America, teenagers such as Daphne take on part-time jobs like dog-sitting, baby-sitting, and waitressing.





▲ Cherry blossoms make a pretty spring picture in Washington, D.C.



The Honor System is ▲ a system of integrity that pervades American society — you are trusted to do the right thing.



▶ You can get shopping bargains galore at outlet malls. Woodbury Common in New York State has famous designer brands and is an easy day trip from New York City.



▲ Shovel your sidewalks and walkways during snow storms.



▲ If you live in wintry areas, your car may get snowed under during winter storms.



▶ Must-haves for the colder areas in America — well-made winter coat with a hood and accessories such as scarf and gloves.

## SURVIVAL SKILLS

What helped me to survive in the U.S. is quickly learning some essential skills such as driving, cooking, savvy shopping, self-medicating, and DIY (Do It Yourself) skills. Public transport is limited in the U.S. so driving skills are necessary unless you live in a dense city like New York City. Cooking is an essential skill as eating out is expensive and the Standard American Diet is unhealthy. I learnt how to be a smart shopper so that I can protect my wallet from being emptied — shopping can be refined to a fine art here as it is possible to get fantastic bargains with just a little homework. Self-medicating and keeping healthy are also important — being sick in the U.S. is no fun since medical expenses can be astronomical. Since I do not have many family members here, I will have to depend on the tender, loving care of friends when I am unwell. I am not adept at DIY but am blessed with a husband who is hands-on and gifted with fixing things around the house. We save a bundle doing things ourselves since labor costs are high in the U.S. compared to Asia.

### DRIVING IN THE U.S.

The driving system here is different from Singapore — it is right-hand drive instead of the British system of left-hand driving. Americans drive on the right hand side of the road while sitting on the left side of the car. My husband taught me to remember this cardinal rule that applies for both right-hand and left-hand driving — the driver must be near the road divider and not near the curb. If you find yourself near the curbside, you are in trouble because you are driving against traffic! I found myself in this tight spot several times but thankfully, I managed to get back to the correct lane quickly.

When driving in the U.S., make sure that you are next to the road divider and not next to the curbside. Be careful because, instinctively, you will tend to revert to driving Singapore-style especially when there are no cars in front to guide you.

One of the first things on my must-do list upon arriving in the U.S. was to get a car and be mobile. The public transportation system of trains and buses is limited — for instance, in the Washington, D.C. area, it only covers downtown areas. Taxis are expensive and there are no convenient taxi stands around, unlike in Singapore where hailing a cab is easy and relatively inexpensive.

### Get a Driving License

With the Singapore International Driving License, I can drive here for one year without a local license. However, I needed to get a local license quickly as it also serves as my Identity Card. U.S. residents do not have Identity Cards, so whenever someone ask to see my ID (identity document), they expect me to produce my driving license. Initially, I felt like a non-person here when I did not have my driver's license.

Do not expect a positive experience when getting a driver's license from the local Motor Vehicle Administration (MVA). Many of our Singapore friends expected more from a First World country and they were sorely disappointed. The U.S. civil service is not known for efficiency or courtesy, so be forewarned and be prepared for long queues and for counter staff who are less than helpful. On a positive note, I have noticed some improvement over the years, and my kids had better experiences at the MVA offices than my husband and I did.

There are different regulations in the different states on getting a driver's license. In Maryland, teenagers who are a mere 15 years and nine months can get a driver's license! I still think that is too young an age to drive. I have guided two teenagers through the driving maze so here are some inside tips. I had to register them with a driving school to do the compulsory 36-hour driving course — there will be 30 hours of classroom instruction and six hours of practical driving. Upon completing the classroom sessions, they had to register for a vision and theory test at the MVA. For the theory test, you need to read the Drivers' Handbook carefully as it will familiarize you with driving rules in the U.S., particularly driving in inclement weather. You can get a free copy of the Handbook at the MVA office. For the 20-questions computerized test, you are only allowed three mistakes (I made exactly three mistakes). You will then be able to get a Learner's Permit that is valid for 12 months. These procedures apply to Maryland, and you will need to check with your local MVA.

With the Learner's Permit, you can start your driving lessons — for Maryland, you need at least 60 hours of driving experience. I like the fact that you do not have to spend money hiring a driving instructor. In Singapore, I would have spent a few thousand bucks for my kids to get their licenses. Here, my kids learnt with me as their driving instructor. You can have your spouse or friend sit beside you while you practice your driving — your instructor just have to be above 21 years old and have three years of driving experience. Your spouse or friend has to be fearless and you have to promise to treat their lives with utmost respect! You have to faithfully chalk up 60 hours driving under various road conditions, including on rainy and snowy days — it is an honor system as there is no way they can check on that. My husband and I have taught both my children to be safe drivers though there have been many harrowing incidents. I am sure some

of my gray hairs are due to the 100 odd hours I spent driving with my teenagers.

Six months after getting your Learner's permit, you are eligible to register for the driving test to get a Provisional Driver's license, provided you have completed your 60 hours of driving. The test is relatively easy as it only involves circuit driving at the driving test center and does not require you to go onto the road. (However, I heard this might change soon.) You do need to be adept at the required driving maneuvers such as parallel parking and 3-point turn. Both my kids passed at their first attempts.

### **Car Purchase**

Buying our first car was an unpleasant experience. Many car dealers use a hard sell technique that seeks to wear down the customer through a lengthy bargaining process. Even though we had a kind friend who sat with us through the process, it was still harrowing. There is a common perception that many car dealers cannot be trusted, as they will try to rip you off to maximize their own commission. At the end of the day, my husband and I bought the Toyota Avalon that we were keen on. We were elated with the price since cars in the U.S. are so cheap by Singapore standards. We paid about US\$25,000 (S\$45,000) for the brand new 3.5 liter car and, considering that we just sold our one-year-old 1.3 liter Mitsubishi Lancer for S\$70,000, we were in a state of bliss. However, the dealership left a bad taste in our mouth because they did not deliver a promised CD changer. The item was promised verbally but the salesperson conveniently forgot to write it down. So we learnt a lesson that we should always get oral promises written in black and white and that we should read the entire contract carefully before we sign it. We were wiser when we bought our other



cars — we did extensive homework, compared prices, and were better prepared to drive a hard bargain. Not researching and not bargaining is unwise and could set you back by thousands of dollars.

Some of my friends buy and sell their cars through a reputable used car dealer Carmax. You pay a premium when you buy a car at Carmax but the advantage is the warranty that they offer for pre-used cars (in Singapore lingo, second-hand cars). They promise that you will not get a ‘lemon’ (often used in the U.S. to refer to a sour or lousy deal). Similarly, selling your car to Carmax means that you are selling below the market price but the convenience is that you determine the date that you hand the car over. When you bring your car to Carmax, they assess your car and promise to buy it at an appraisal value that is valid for seven days. If you are leaving the U.S., it is a no-hassle way to sell your car and you can drive the car till the day you depart.

I usually advise my friends to get a relatively new car since the repair bills for old cars can be hefty. Added to that is the safety factor — my friend’s old car stalled in the middle of a busy highway. That is dangerous! Furthermore, it happened on a frigid winter day — sitting in the cold waiting for help to arrive is no fun. Another reason why I opted for a new car is because I drive long distances to explore the country and need a reliable vehicle. Sometimes, I travel to remote places where help is not easily available.

When buying a car, do your homework, compare prices, and be prepared to drive a hard bargain.

Whether you are buying or selling a car, good resources to consult on the price tags are Kelley Blue Book ([www.kbb.com](http://www.kbb.com)) and Edmunds ([www.Edmunds.com](http://www.Edmunds.com)).

### Traffic Rules and Traffic Police

Some traffic rules in the U.S. are different from Singapore. When I first started driving in the U.S., I had trouble finding a U-turn sign — silly me, I could have U-turned at any junction unless there is a ‘No-U Turn’ sign! I soon learnt that in the U.S., I can U-turn and also Turn on Red as long as there are no signs forbidding me to do so. The system gives drivers a lot of discretion and only disallows it when it is not safe to do so. It is unlike Singapore where I have to look out for signs that explicitly allow me to do traffic maneuvers.

When driving in the U.S., be on the lookout for police cars with sirens, ambulances, and fire engines as they are the kings of the road! If I see any of these vehicles, I have to do my utmost to clear a lane for them to race through. If I am on the left lane (fast lane), I need to signal and quickly move over to the right lane and stop at the side of the road. If need be, I can go through a red light junction or turn at a junction to avoid hindering them. Basically, I must get out of their way so that they can race to their destinations to help in some emergency. To me, that is a key stress point of driving here. On occasion, I have seen these vehicles go against traffic — that is scary! Sadly, there are instances where police cars have gotten into accidents because of that.

Look out for school buses too. When a school bus flashes its hazard lights and pulls out the STOP sign from the side of the vehicle, cars on both sides of the road have to stop about 100 feet away from the bus and patiently wait for the children to get off the bus and cross the road safely. I think this is a good policy though it may have the unintended effect of giving kids the mindset that they can just dash across the road and expect all traffic to be mindful of them. During school dismissal time, be mindful about the 25 mph speed limit. In

my area, there are many speed cameras near the schools, and if I am not careful, I will end up paying hefty fines.

When parking in the U.S., be sure to read the signage near the parking lots. Sometimes parking is permitted during certain hours/days and prohibited during specific times and days. Be sure to have ample quarters (25 cent coins) with you as many parking meters take quarters only. In busy cities, sometimes parking is limited to 30 minutes or one hour. My car was once towed away when I failed to read the parking instructions carefully; I had to pay US\$100 to get my car back. Expensive lesson!

It is important to know what to do and what not to do if you are stopped by a police officer. It helped when my husband explained the mindset of the police officer. This is a country where it is legal to carry firearms so the officer is wary when he stops someone on the road. There are occasions when police officers have been shot by the drivers that they stopped. Some of my American friends tell me that they keep guns in their glove compartment for emergencies. Hence, police officers are mindful of that.

This is what you should do if you are stopped by a police officer. Once, I was pulled over by a police officer for going at 40 mph on a road which has a speed limit of 25 mph. Stopping my car by the side of the road, I wound down my window and made sure that my hands were on the steering wheel where he could see them. The officer approached my car from behind with one hand on his gun in the holster. I think I looked harmless but he would still do that for precaution. I did not try to get out of the car — my Singapore friend did that and was wrestled down and handcuffed! Getting out of the car is menacing to the police officer! For me, I was seated somewhat calmly since

this incident took place on my seventh year here so I knew what to expect. I did not reach out for my driving license yet because that might give the wrong signal that I was reaching out for a handgun. Only when the police officer asked me for my driver's license did I move my hands and fumble in my handbag for my license. In my case, he was kind enough to tell me that I was driving at 40 mph but he would write it down as 35 mph so as to lessen my fine. That was a very small consolation as I was US\$50 poorer after that incident.

Be prepared to be confused by U.S. measurements — inch, foot, yard, and mile are used instead of the Singapore metric system. So do adjust mentally when you come here. The speed signs are in miles per hour (mph) instead of kilometers per hour. You pump gallons of gas instead of liters of petrol; Americans refer to petrol as gas.

## SHOPPING

### Outlets and Coupons

Shopping is a pleasurable experience in the U.S. and the 'Singapore bird' never fails to say, 'cheap, cheap, cheap' when shopping here. There are bargains galore and an unbelievable range of products. Americans are great consumers and they drive the economy with their unbridled consumerism. (The current recession has dampened that.) The outlet malls usually have fantastic bargains especially if you are not fussy about having the latest fads and fashion. Tourists invariably head out to the many outlet malls all over the country when they come here. Branded products such as Coach handbags, Polo Ralph Lauren apparel, and Clark shoes are heavily discounted.



To save more, look out for extra savings coupons at your hotel, tourist information center, or outlet customer service desk.

Coupons are essential to the shopping experience — I cut coupons from the newspapers (usually weekend editions) and from advertisement flyers. I also search for them online and print from websites such as [www.couponmountain.com](http://www.couponmountain.com) and [www.smartsources.com](http://www.smartsources.com). The savings from coupons can be substantial. With some careful planning, it is entirely possible to get products for free. (More on this in the next segment Free Stuff in this chapter.) Look out for grocery stores that declare doubling and tripling of coupons. Doubling means that my US\$1 coupon is worth US\$2 and tripling means my US\$1 coupon is worth US\$3. For instance, I had a US\$0.75 coupon for Colgate that cost US\$2.50. The Harris Teeter grocery store advertised that it would triple coupons this week — that meant that my US\$0.75 coupon became US\$2.25, and that instead of US\$2.50, I paid US\$0.25 for my Colgate. On another occasion, CVS pharmacy advertised that it is giving US\$2 in loyalty rewards for buying Colgate priced at US\$2.50. Since I have a coupon for US\$0.75 on Colgate, I had a net gain of US\$0.25 for buying Colgate. That is why grocery shopping can be fun and fulfilling in the U.S.!

On arriving here, a good first stop is the Dollar Shop. There are Dollar Shops in many locations in the U.S. where everything sells for one buck — it is a good place to get daily necessities such as stationery, cleaning stuff, and other household items. The prices are definitely more competitive than the main grocery chains here. Also try Five Below shops that sell everything for less than five bucks.

With the four seasons in some parts of the U.S., you can save a great deal if you buy items which are not required for the current season

— usually there are massive price-cuts for out-of-season items. For instance, I buy heavily discounted winter wear at the beginning of spring and buy summer clothes at the end of summer. Besides factory outlets, great places to shop at are Wal-Mart, Target, and discount stores such as Costco and Sam's Club. I have also gotten great bargains from thrift shops. Given the extensive range of products and attractive prices, it is difficult to resist the temptation to buy more than what I need; I confess to one misdemeanor — I once bought 20 pairs of shoes at a Clarks Bostonian's outlet sale in Hanover, Pennsylvania; I was sorely tempted as the well-made Clark shoes were only US\$15-US\$20 each! This compares with US\$80 at the malls. The shoe sales take place twice a year in the spring and fall.

What is wonderful about shopping in the U.S. is the option to return the products if you change your mind about the purchase. I really like that — no questions asked, no raised eyebrows, and no black faces. This applies to most shops though there are some exceptions. Having the option to return stuff liberates shoppers to just buy first even if they are undecided. It is a great marketing ploy. There is an honor system in place that the shopper has the integrity to return a product that is not used yet. Usually, this trust is well placed but sometimes this return policy is abused — some people would use the item then return them. Hence, some shops have a tracking system to check on customers who do excessive returns.

If you can wait, holidays are the best time to shop. Great deals are offered during Memorial Day, Veteran's Day, Columbus Day, and especially during the Thanksgiving period. The biggest shopping day is Black Friday in November, the day after Thanksgiving. It is termed Black Friday because that is the day when shoppers fill the cash registers and turn any accounts in the red to a solid black! The

Monday after Black Friday is called Cyber Monday as you can get steep discounts shopping online.

### Internet Deals

Many Americans shop via the Internet as they can get great bargains without leaving the comfort of home. Besides Ebay, other websites worth checking out are [www.overstock.com](http://www.overstock.com), [www.smartbargains.com](http://www.smartbargains.com), [www.dealnews.com](http://www.dealnews.com), [www.wow-coupons.com](http://www.wow-coupons.com), [www.fatwallet.com](http://www.fatwallet.com), [www.pricegrabber.com](http://www.pricegrabber.com), and [www.shopzilla.com](http://www.shopzilla.com). For Internet shopping, I have learnt that it is wise to buy from reputable Internet stores such as [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com). This is because you will be giving out important credit card information. There was one occasion when a web-hosting company tried to scam me by overcharging my credit card. More about that in the Scams segment in this chapter.

### Garage Sales

When the weather turns nice and warm, it is fun to go to garage sales and hunt for bargains. I have gotten great buys such as ski boots and golf shoes for a song — two pairs of ski boots set me back by a mere US\$20 (a new pair costs US\$100) and a good as new pair of Nike golf shoes worth US\$50 cost me only US\$2! To get good deals, go to garage sales in the more affluent areas where there are lots of good quality stuff that are heavily discounted. I held two garage sales so far and made some good hard cash out of items that were just lying around the house and occupying space. As many families move in and out of the Washington, D.C. area, there are many bargains to be had, especially from moving sales and estate sales. My husband and I also enjoy seeking out bargains in rummage sales held by churches for fund-raising.

## FREE STUFF

The U.S. is a land of abundance, with many free things lying around for those who will do a little homework! Check out [www.craigslist.org](http://www.craigslist.org) and you will find a link on free stuff under the For Sale section. Go through and find something you like! In the Washington, D.C. area, the items listed include couches, TVs, and exercise machines. The only snag is that you usually have to pick up the items by the same day. I joined Freecycle (at [www.freecycle.org](http://www.freecycle.org)) to get free stuff from the members and also give away things that I no longer need. This group has the laudable goal of keeping usable stuff out of landfills. I am a member of Swaptree (free membership) that allows me to swap books, CDs, and DVDs. Being a member in Paperback Swap allows me to swap books — I get free books by giving away books I no longer need.

My husband sometimes raids other people's discards and finds treasures in trash that are totally free! (Over here, trash or rubbish is collected only once a week unlike the daily collection we have in Singapore.) Edwin has retrieved a full set of Dunlop golf clubs, a leaf blower (for clearing leaves during autumn time), and a wine rack that needed minor repairs. He headed to the DIY store and bought wood for US\$4 to refurbish the wine rack — it looked as good as new. Sometimes, I live in fear that our house would be cluttered up with this particular hobby that my husband revels in. If raiding the trash is not your cup of tea, there are lots of other ways to get free stuff in the U.S.

Many service providers allow you to sample their services for free. Netflix (which does rentals of movies and games) offers a 2-week free trial, with no obligation to continue with the service. However, do be

wary of free services as some will automatically charge you after the free trial expires if you do not call in to cancel the service. A word of caution — do be careful and read the fine print. Some things appear to be freebies but are not. For instance, if you register for freebies on some websites, you are agreeing to make some compulsory purchases that would drain you of cash. Some so-called free offers are really scams to entrap you into agreeing to a contractual agreement so it is prudent to be discerning. If something is too good to be true, it usually is.

I wrote most of this book at Panera Bread because there is free Wifi and also free refills for tea and coffee. You can find these bakery-cafes all over the U.S. Another cafe that offers free Wifi is Corner Bakery. At my favorite grocery Trader Joe's, there is free coffee, free samples of food, free balloons, and stickers for kids — that gives a customer like me a warm and fuzzy feeling. Free cheese and food sampling is also available in Whole Foods — second on my list of favorite grocery stores. I frequent Costco for our bulk purchases of household stuff — lots of free food samples there but the annual membership is US\$50.

Most of the museums in Washington, D.C. are free so I have made repeated visits there especially when I have guests in town. There are free performances at the Kennedy Center every day. The facilities at state parks can be enjoyed for free; parks are great places to unwind during weekends. During festive seasons, we attend many free concerts staged by churches in the area — I like the Easter and Christmas pageants. During summer, there are lots of stuff to do that is free such as enjoying summer concerts in the parks and music performances at music centers. In Washington, D.C., military bands play outdoors during summer evenings.

Many stores give away free stuff to lure customers through the doors. Bath and Body Works gives away free body lotion and the free products are located right at the end of the store so I need strong willpower to walk through the length of the store and resist the temptation to buy. My daughter and I make regular trips to Victoria's Secret as they give away free panties every other month (you have to sign up for their store card). I have gotten freebies from new stores that open in the area. For instance, I received flyers to collect free flash-drives and SD cards during the first few months that a giant computer store opened in Rockville. I got free groceries from Safeway when they completed their renovation and wanted customers to drop in to see their new look. I visited the store and walked away with free orange juice, free eggs, free bread, and free bacon. CVS Pharmacy gives out lots of freebies throughout the year through their loyalty reward program. During the biggest shopping day of the year, which is Black Friday (the fourth Friday of November), many stores give away freebies to early bird shoppers to lure customers into the store — my husband would wake up at 5 a.m. to get bargains and has walked away with freebies such as a shredder, power cords, and CD-Rs.

I enjoy going to the public libraries here and the membership is free. My kids are thrilled that they can borrow 30 books at a go. There are some great DVDs and music CDs at the libraries. You can surf the Internet for free at the public libraries. The libraries in my area offer free English conversation classes and free story-telling sessions for toddlers. I have brought my kids to free summer workshops at the libraries where they get to learn about science and animals. I have also signed up for free business counseling at the library — the one-on-one counseling is provided by SCORE (Service Corps of Retired Executives). Different chapters of SCORE are available all over the U.S. and are run by volunteers who are executives or business

entrepreneurs. They provide expertise on a wide range of subjects, including writing business plans and import-export procedures. I get my free business cards from Vistaprint and just pay for shipping.

We have received free money from banks when we opened our bank accounts. My son received US\$100 when he opened a Wachovia account. When he introduced his friend to open a bank account, both of them got US\$25 each. This kind of friend-get-friend promotion works well. This country is aptly called the land of plenty — it is literally overflowing with goodies for those who are willing to do some research.

## SCAMS IN THE U.S.

Edwin and I have encountered many instances of scams in the U.S., and so I would like to sound a note of caution. While there are many honest folks here, there are also many opportunists who prey on the unsuspecting. If a deal is too good to be true, it usually is a scam. You may have heard of the Madoff ponzi scandal, which is one type of scam. Ponzi schemes offer returns on investment that are higher than what legitimate investment schemes offer so that they can entice investors to put their money in the scheme. I was scammed once by a web-hosting company which hosted a website for my tea business. Here is how the scam went. The company offered me a low monthly fee for web hosting and I was locked in for three years. When my contract was up, they increased the monthly fee from US\$5 to a hefty US\$49.95 per month and charged my credit card upfront for the amount US\$1,798.20 for 36 months. I successfully disputed the charge through a laborious process but the rogue company tried to put the same bill on my credit card the following month and I had

to go through the hassle of disputing the charge again. To stop the scamming, I had to cancel my credit card. Since then, I have decided to designate just one credit card for Internet transactions. If need be, I could just cancel that credit card to prevent recurring charges that I did not authorize.

When I sell items on craigslist, I am wary about possible scams as well. As a rule of thumb, ask for hard cash instead of accepting checks (which can bounce), cashier's orders (which can be counterfeit) or wire transfers. If the buyer does not live in the local area, it should raise a red flag. More information on scams can be found at [www.craigslist.org/about/scams](http://www.craigslist.org/about/scams).

## MEDICAL

Medical expenses are a major factor in living costs in the U.S. Coming from a country where medical costs is low and heavily subsidized by the government, I was astounded at the hefty cost of seeing a doctor here. My first encounter was when I brought my daughter to the doctor for what I thought was a simple flu. The nurse practitioner (not even a doctor) who attended to my daughter did a strep test and a urine test — to me that was strange (a strep test analyzes whether streptococcal bacteria is causing a sore throat). The bill came to a shocking US\$120 and that excludes medication. I was given a prescription and had to go to a pharmacy to get the medication, which cost US\$20 (the term meds or medication is used instead of medicine). I was in a state of culture shock because in Singapore, I would only pay about US\$15 for both consultation and medication instead of a whopping US\$140! It is common for doctors to run a battery of tests just to be sure they do thorough checks and would not be sued for negligence. I have

since found an Asian doctor who charges half the price and does not subject my daughter to unnecessary tests. However, I was unable to recommend this pediatrician to my friends, as she would not accept any more new patients. I learnt that many doctors only want to work with familiar patients and do not want to subject themselves to patients who might sue them for misdiagnosis. Apparently, the medical insurance that doctors have to buy is getting higher. My family doctor prefers to work with fewer patients and would rather have less income than be exposed to potential legal liabilities. We have since learnt to self-medicate just like many Americans do — go to a pharmacy and pick up the medication for minor ailments. I bought a book on how to treat non-life-threatening medical problems and would often consult WebMD or the Mayo Clinic websites for advice.

I am careful in choosing the doctors I consult. There are excellent doctors in this area especially in world famous institutions such as Johns Hopkins Hospital. However, not every doctor is reliable or ethical. Some overcharge for their services. It is wise to get a recommendation from someone you trust before consulting a specialist.

It is essential to get medical insurance coverage in the U.S. My son had a 2-week hospital stay for a ruptured appendix and the bill amounted to US\$13,000. Fortunately, Edwin's company covered the whole family with medical insurance; we paid only US\$345, a mere fraction of the cost. In the U.S., there is a complicated system of health insurance coverage to cover medical and dental costs. Usually, the company buys group insurance for all the employees. Some companies require their employees to pay part of the insurance coverage while other companies pick up the entire tab. I have American friends who

choose not to buy medical insurance, especially those who are self-employed. Some are disciplined enough to set aside the approximate US\$500 per month in their savings while others are not so disciplined and simply take their chances. No wonder, it is reported that a major illness can bring a middle class family to the edge of bankruptcy.

If you have family members or friends visiting you in the U.S., do advise them to get comprehensive travel insurance for their trips here.

## WEATHER AND CLOTHING

Coming from a tropical island, I am amazed at the array of clothing items needed for the different seasons. It is a great excuse to expand my wardrobe so that I can be comfortable for the wide temperature range of minus 10°C (14°F) on a frigid winter day to blistering heat of 40°C (104°F) on a summer day in the Washington, D.C. area. In the winter, the best way to beat the cold outdoors and sometimes the overheated indoors is 'layering.' Wearing three to four layers on a winter day keeps me snug and warm and also allows me the flexibility to peel off the layers when I go indoors or when the temperature goes up. Sometimes, the temperature difference within a day can be substantial. My sister visited me during the winter and was pleased that the day temperature was a bearable 7°C (45°F). She left the house in light winter wear. However, she was caught unawares when the temperature dipped to minus 9°C (15°F) during the evening. It is wise to check the weather forecast before leaving home. While the forecasts may not be entirely accurate, it helps to be prepared. Please see Appendix C for winter tips and layering while dressing for winter.



## EMERGENCY PREPARATION

I encountered our first power outage soon after arriving in the U.S. It felt strange coming from super-efficient Singapore where the last blackout I experience was when I was a kid. While our small land area has enabled us to conceal our electrical cables underground, this is not the case in the U.S. where many cables hang overhead and are exposed to the vagaries of the weather. Power is often disrupted during heavy snow days. Sometimes, strong winds cause trees to be uprooted and fall on cable lines. On one occasion, a severe storm buffeted our area and we were out of power for a good three days! It was wintertime and with no heating in the house, we literally froze. The first night was fun for the kids — since the TV and computers did not work, they had our undivided attention. We played monopoly in front of the fireplace for many hours and had to huddle close to the burning logs to get warm. We also pigged out and roasted marshmallows in the flames. The next few days were not as fun as we had to dress up in thick clothing at home and sleep in ski masks! Do not ask how many showers we took during those few days. On hindsight, we should have booked into a hotel. So I quickly found out what I needed to stock in preparation for emergencies such as power outages, and my recommendations are at Appendix D.

## DIY SKILLS

Labor cost is rather high in the U.S., as you might have imagined. The minimum wage in the U.S. is about US\$7, depending on the state. So it follows that all services come at a premium price. When we first arrived, I was curious about the garbage disposal grinder that is under the kitchen sink. Do be careful about this gadget, as the grinder

is powerful and can even grind chicken bones. (If I drop something into the grinder, I do not use my fingers to pick it up but use a tong instead). Since the grinder is so convenient, I happily tested it and stuffed a lot of garbage down my kitchen sink. That was a big mistake as it takes a lot of water to flush the garbage down the pipes and I did not know that. So, the kitchen sink was choked and I had to summon the plumber — the bill was an exorbitant US\$160! The plumber charged US\$10 for every foot of a plumbing snake that he extended to clear the drainpipe. We grew wiser — Edwin headed for the DIY store and bought this plumbing snake device to clear choked pipes. DIY skills are a necessity in the U.S. — fix it yourself and you will save a tidy sum. Thankfully, Edwin is a handyman who enjoys tinkering with tools and fixing things around the house.

He is fascinated with the amazing range of products at DIY stores and thrilled by how much money he could save just by doing some simple repair work by himself instead of paying someone for the service. For instance, there were two occasions when we locked ourselves out of the house. My husband thought I brought the house keys and I assumed he brought his but neither of us did. We did not want to call the locksmith so Edwin kicked the door (a la Hollywood police movie!) and then repaired the hinges. Some doors are flimsy and can be easily kicked off its hinges. The same thing happened to my friend twice — he told me he called the locksmith and was set back by US\$120 per visit!

My husband also does minor car repairs himself. When our brake pads and rotor were due to be replaced, we were told that the bill would be US\$380 for the job. Edwin went online and researched on how to change the parts himself — he found videos showing how it can be done. So he ordered the parts and ‘DIYed’ it — I was impressed as the parts only cost US\$120 and we saved a whopping US\$260!

## SECURITY

In Chapter 1, I mentioned the importance of looking for a safe neighborhood to stay in. Security is constantly on my mind in the U.S. There are alarm systems in all the houses I stayed in. It deters burglary and gives me peace of mind. When I park my cars on my driveway, I always ensure that they are locked. My friend's car, while parked on her own driveway, was broken into and the robber stole her credit card that was in the car. Whenever I leave the house, I always check to see if any windows are open — my friend's house was burglarized and the burglar entered through a window that was habitually left open.

When going away on vacations, ensure that you have time switches that will turn lights on and off in the evenings. You can buy plug-in adapters used to light up table lamps. Also, remember to stop the newspaper delivery and mail delivery (do that at [www.usps.com](http://www.usps.com)). You should also get friends or neighbors to check on your house and remove any advertisement flyers that may be left at the front door — sure telltale signs that nobody is at home. My husband believes in keeping a baseball bat and golf club handy. Many Americans keep handguns at home. My daughter and I have pepper sprays. (Some states have specific regulations regarding the use of pepper sprays. For instance, in Washington, D.C., registration with the local law enforcement is required.)

If you need help with directions, it is unwise to just stop and ask anyone along the road. Go to a gas station or a convenience store (such as 7-Eleven) instead. Do not pick up hitch-hikers along the road — you may well be inviting trouble.

Asking for directions:

“Sir, can you tell me where is the nearest train station?”

“Ma’am, walk down three blocks and turn to your right.”

Note: It is polite to address others as Sir or Ma’am. ‘Three blocks’ means that you walk past three streets.

## CREDIT CARD AND CREDIT WORTHINESS

We have been befuddled by the credit system in the U.S. It is complicated and there is this all-important credit score that measures our credit standing. Also referred to as a FICO score, it ranges from 300 to 850 and higher is better. When a foreigner comes to the U.S., he does not have a credit history and hence does not have a credit score. To the financial institutions, that is a negative and banks are wary of letting him open a bank account with a debit card and would not issue him a credit card. Our Singapore friend, who is new to the U.S., was advised to build up his credit history by taking up a loan from the bank — he had to endure a high interest rate since he was not deemed creditworthy. By taking up the loan and then repaying it faithfully on time every month, he was able to establish his credit history. That sounds strange but that is how it is done here.

To get a good credit score, I had to pay up my loans and credit card bills on time. This proves to the banks that I am financially responsible, and this in turn enhances my credit score. I recently requested for my personal credit report from [www.experian.com](http://www.experian.com) out of curiosity. My good credit standing was evaluated based on this key statement in the credit report: ‘Paid in full/Never late.’ My husband and I have good credit scores in the 700s as we have made timely

payments on our loans and credit card bills. Defaulting on loans and late payments on bills will bring down a credit score and signal to financial institutions that you are not responsible in managing your money and have overextended yourself. With a good credit score, you can get car loans and home mortgage loans at favorable interest rates. For instance, we were able to get a car loan at 0% APR — basically an interest-free loan! (APR stands for Annual Percentage Rate.)

## TIPPING

Giving tips does not come naturally to Singaporeans but it is an important part of U.S. culture. Tips are rewards for good service. For lunch and dinner at restaurants, tip 15% for good service and 20% or more for excellent service. If you have a party of six, a 15% tip is usually automatically added to your bill. Do check your bill. Waiters and waitresses have a low basic income and earn more from tips. It is good etiquette to tip for good service. If you are unhappy with the service, you can choose not to tip or just give a small tip. For counter service and fast food restaurants, you are not required to tip but you can choose to leave a dollar or two in the tip jars.

When I go to the hairstylist, I usually tip 15% or more, depending on the service. For food delivery, a 10% tip is fine. For bellhops, tip US\$1 per bag. When you stay at a hotel, you can choose to leave between US\$2 to US\$5 on your pillow for housekeeping. If you ask for something to be delivered to your room, such as an extra pillow or a luggage rack, tip US\$2 to US\$3.

When I first arrived in the U.S., I did not know much about the tipping culture. To this day, I feel embarrassed when I think about the

following incident. I received a flyer that a certain cosmetics counter would be providing free make-up so I signed up for a session just before a diplomatic function. The lady did a good job, and I happily walked away without paying a dime since it was free. Shortly after that, I saw her at an eatery and she seemed to look at me accusingly — I realized later that I should have tipped her for the free service but did not due to my ignorance.



## Appendix C

### WINTER TIPS

#### Layering of clothing during the winter:

**1<sup>st</sup> layer** – thermal underwear, either thinsulate or polyester, preferably material that feels comfortable next to your skin and also wicks moisture away from your skin. If I am spending most of my time indoors, I prefer cotton.

**2<sup>nd</sup> layer** – sweater, fleece, vest, hoodie or pullover that insulates by trapping warm air inside and keeping cold air out. Some like wool but I prefer fleece or a polyester/cotton combination.

**3<sup>rd</sup> layer** – outercoat that protects you from the direct elements of snow, sleet, wind or rain. I recommend investing in a well-made winter coat that can be zipped up, with a hood and comfortable pockets. You can choose from wool, leather or polyester. For extremely cold weather, what works best is a jacket that is padded with down feathers.

**Shoes** – you will need sturdy and comfortable shoes because there is a great deal of walking to do here when you go enjoy the outdoors. Your winter shoes should be able to provide good traction on cold and wet pavements, and keep you warm and dry through at least six inches of snow. I like leather boots and water-resistant hiking shoes. Long socks keep me warm and so do toe socks. On those days when my driveway was covered with slippery ice, I had to wear golf shoes with spikes to be able to walk without slipping — it is no fun falling on ice.

**Accessories** – a hat (either fleece or wool) to cover your head is important because up to 60% of body heat is lost through an uncovered head. Put your hood over your covered head for added warmth. Wear gloves as your hands tend to get cold quickly since the body channels heat away from hands and feet to the chest to protect the essential organs. I prefer leather gloves as they are durable and windproof while woolen gloves allow cold air to filter through. Mittens are warmer than gloves. When it is very cold, I wear thin gloves under a pair of mittens. Wear a scarf to protect your neck and put on earmuffs to shield your ears especially if you are doing winter walks.

#### Other Winter Tips

1. Have rock salt, sand or cat litter handy so you can throw the salt/sand/cat litter on iced-up sidewalks and driveways.
2. Buy a snow shovel to clear snow from walkways and driveways and also to dig out your car if it is snowed under.
3. Keep an ice scraper in each car (I prefer the ice scraper cum snow brush)
4. Have warm fleece blankets in the car (in case you need to turn off the heating in your car when you are caught in a big traffic jam or if your car stalls on the road)
5. Winterize your car. Check your battery, fill up windshield washer fluid, have extra wipers, ensure your tires have adequate tread, and have a full tank of petrol when there is a storm warning.



## Appendix D

### EMERGENCY SUPPLIES

These are needed in case of emergencies such as terrorist attacks and power outages during winter storms/hurricanes.

1. torchlights and batteries (The kids have their personal torchlights in their rooms and so do we.)
2. oil lamps and oil supply (I prefer these to candles.)
3. camping light that gives fluorescent light (I like this.)
4. candles (We do not like using candles for lighting as many houses have been torched by candle accidents since most houses here are made of wood-based materials that catch fire easily.)
5. battery-powered radio so we know the latest news (and extra batteries)
6. corded phone (cordless phones need electricity so they do not work)
7. gallons of water
8. food that is non-perishable and easy to cook (e.g. canned food and dried food)
9. portable camp cookstove that uses portable gas canisters (extra gas canisters)
10. firestarter and logs of wood for the fireplace
11. matches
12. gas lighters (stand by extras as they run out of gas without warning)
13. first aid kit
14. non-electric can openers
15. for winter storms, it is useful to have portable hand warmers and toe warmers

## ENJOY LIFE — LET'S EXPLORE & LET'S PARTY

If you have an insatiable quest for adventure, life in the U.S. may well satisfy that thirst. If you have the travel bug, living in the U.S. can be great fun as it is a huge country that spans 50 states, and there is great diversity of landscape. Americans like to explore, and they enjoy parties. Many Americans spend their weekends and holidays on exploration trips, and many revel in any excuse to gather with friends and family to party.

“How was your weekend?” — this question is a sure winner on a Monday morning. It is almost guaranteed to bring on a smile and generate a sense of well-being. Americans treasure their weekends and leisure time. They work hard and play equally hard. I like this balanced approach to life that many Americans have. In Singapore, there were many occasions when I spent my weekends working — I think I speak for many overworked Singaporeans. I learnt to enjoy my weekends after I came to the U.S. There is so much to see and do! During the first year we were in the Washington, D.C. area, we made day trips to explore places of interest every single weekend! My daughter's 1<sup>st</sup> grade teacher was incredulous when she saw the weekly journal entries made by my daughter about all the interesting trips. She actually asked me if that was true and then encouraged me to bring along one of Daphne's classmates as one way to help Daphne get to know more friends in school. We behaved more like long-term tourists during those initial years. After living in this area for 10 years, we have slowed down in our quest for new adventures and fresh places to visit. But there are still many places on our ‘To Visit’ list.



We joined AAA (Automobile Association of America) where we can get advice on travel, access to maps, and motor vehicle assistance. With AAA membership, we also get hotel discounts, discounts at outlet malls, and preferential rates at various leisure places. The Internet is a wonderful source of information as well. Air tickets, hotel rooms, and car rental can be booked on various discount websites such as [www.travelocity.com](http://www.travelocity.com), [www.expedia.com](http://www.expedia.com), [www.hotels.com](http://www.hotels.com), and [www.cheaptickets.com](http://www.cheaptickets.com). If I need driving directions and maps, I go to [www.mapquest.com](http://www.mapquest.com) or [www.maps.google.com](http://www.maps.google.com). To get feedback on places/hotels from other travelers who have been there, check out [www.tripadvisor.com](http://www.tripadvisor.com). I have gotten some nifty advice from the website. The U.S. is blessed with both natural wonders and man-made wonders. There are mountains, lakes, and deserts, all waiting to be explored by the eager traveler. There are also world-famous theme parks and museums. I can almost understand why Americans do not need to leave their country — it is possible to spend a lifetime exploring their own country. In fact, my son's 6<sup>th</sup> grade teacher took one year off from work just to explore the different states in the U.S.

## WASHINGTON, D.C. MUST-SEES

I am fortunate to live near the nation's capital — Americans living in other states aspire to visit Washington, D.C. There are a few must-sees in this area. The museums and memorials on the National Mall are impressive — the Smithsonian museums are definitely worth repeated visits. What is also great about museums in the nation's capital is the price — it is FREE! My favorites are the National Museum of Natural History, National Air & Space Museum, and the Holocaust Museum. They offer insights into the history of the human race and of America through innovative exhibits. I used to think that museums are boring

and musty places but I have since changed my mind. The Capitol Hill (equivalent of our Parliament House where lawmakers work) and the Library of Congress are awesome too. The imposing architecture and the history housed in those monuments are inspiring. The many memorials, such as the World War II Memorial, Lincoln Memorial and Jefferson Memorial, are awe-inspiring. On a delightful spring or fall day, it is fun to stroll through the outdoor memorials and muse about the historical events they portray. Information on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. can be found at [www.washington.org](http://www.washington.org) and [www.culturaltourismdc.org](http://www.culturaltourismdc.org).

Take advantage of the vibrant arts scene in this area. The Kennedy Center stages interesting shows all year round, including free shows (check the weekend newspapers). Visit the numerous art galleries, chief of which is the National Gallery of Art, complete with an ice-skating rink. I live near the Strathmore Music Center in Maryland that offers intriguing performances. The Wolf Trap National Park for the Performing Arts in Virginia is worth a visit. I recommend the annual International Children's Festival in September — the admissions fee is only US\$10, and you get to see many different performances from all over the world, great for both adults and kids.

## NATURAL BEAUTY OF NATIONAL AND STATE PARKS

Coming from a concrete jungle in Singapore, I am almost jealous of the numerous lovely parks that U.S. has. After being used to a city-state dotted with skyscrapers, it is a treat for me to experience the vastness and beauty of nature in the U.S. I will never forget my visits to the mammoth national parks such as the Grand Canyon, Yellowstone, and

Yosemite, which are legendary for their magnificence and splendor. They are not to be missed! A great website for national parks is [www.nps.gov](http://www.nps.gov). My favorite thing to do on weekends is to spend time at a state park nearby. In Maryland and Virginia, there are countless parks to enjoy, usually within three hours' drive. Among the parks we have enjoyed are Assateague Island, Cacapon National Park, Deep Creek Lake, Catoctin Mountain, Great Falls, Lake Needwood, Black Hill, Rock Creek, Lake Anna, Bull Run, and Patapsco parks. There are lots to do — stroll around, have an outdoor picnic, barbeque, bike, do horseback-riding, throw a frisbee, read by a lake, or watch the sunset — it is refreshing and invigorating! I prefer parks with lakes, so I can go boating and fishing. At the Black Hill Regional Park where my family frequents, there are activities centered around the lake, such as pontoon boat tours conducted by naturalist guides and workshops on how to fish, canoe, or kayak. Or simply rent a boat or kayak and explore the lake by yourself. I am mesmerized when I watch reflective sunsets over a lake.

## SPORTS EVENTS

Weekend fun is often centered on sports events. My husband and my son, and their friends, talk incessantly about the sports teams in this area. It is mainly a guy-thing. Watching a live ballgame can be a real treat for a weekend and is a quintessential American experience not to be missed. I have watched baseball games played by the Orioles in their famous stadium Camden Yards, in Baltimore. The game is only one part of it. Integral to the experience is eating Maryland crab cakes, buying Orioles souvenirs, and just enjoying the festive atmosphere at a ballpark. I was told that if a ball flies into the spectator stand, I should not dodge, but catch it and keep it! Sports memorabilia are

valued and sometimes worth a lot of money. That is why my husband brings his baseball glove along when he goes for a baseball game.

American football games are great fun too especially since the two males in my family are enthusiastic football fans. I enjoy watching college football games at the University of Maryland and soaking in the electrifying atmosphere. As part of a great American tradition, there are tailgate parties preceding the games that take place around the football stadium. It is quite a sight to see crowds celebrating in parking lots and in fields near the stadium. They simply open the trunks of their cars (boots in Singapore lingo) and set up a portable barbeque or a food table. These celebrations start way before the game begins and often last straight through the game for those who do not have tickets. Students, alumni, and the general public just sit around, socializing and soaking up the atmosphere of the games.

## SKI, SNOWBOARD AND SNOW TUBE

With the changing seasons, different recreational activities are available. When winter is upon us, I look forward to the lovely snow but not the dreary cold. My husband and I enjoy skiing while my kids like the thrill of snowboarding. So we head for the slopes especially after a fresh snowfall. There are many ski resorts in the vicinity — the Wisp in Maryland, Ski Liberty, Whitetail, Seven Springs in Pennsylvania, Snowshoe in West Virginia, and Massanutten in Virginia, just to name a few. Skiing, however, is an expensive sport — ski lift tickets, ski equipment rental, and staying on-site at ski resorts add up to a tidy sum. We look out for bargains, such as skiing pre-season (before Christmas) or after the peak season. We got hooked on skiing after taking pre-season lessons at Ski Liberty which only

cost about US\$30; it is a great deal since we get a ski lesson, rental for the skis/ski boots, and lift tickets to go up the ski slopes. Their marketing strategy worked, and we have spent thousands of dollars on the slopes. We subsequently bought our skis and boots at a steal after the winter season. Now we save on ski equipment and just pay for the lift tickets. For those who do not ski, there are other winter sports to enjoy such as snow-tubing, snowshoeing, snowmobile tours, and sledding. Most ski resorts have snow-tubing slopes, and it is great fun to go down the slope in a tube resembling a huge tire. It is like sledding except that there is a motorized pulley to pull you and the tube up the slope, and you do not have to climb up by yourself. During a snowfall, when schools are closed for the day, we would head for a slope nearby and let the kids enjoy sledding. Some young kids would just sled down their own driveway.

## SPRING FESTIVALS

Spring is a welcome time because we get tired of winter easily, and look forward eagerly to warmer temperatures and the outdoors. Though the winter landscape has a stark beauty of its own, spring is a wonderful respite with its attractive colors of blooming flowers that have been suppressed all winter long. Spring is the time for walks and hikes to take in the lovely hues of the changing landscape. However, do be aware that if you find yourself sneezing, coughing, feeling giddy or having watery eyes, you may be suffering from severe spring allergies because of the high pollen count as the leaves and flowers emerge. In this area, everyone looks forward to the Cherry Blossom Festival — it takes place in early April when the blossoms are at the peak. We head out to the Tidal Basin in Washington, D.C. to gaze at the magical cherry blossom trees that line the basin with soft tones

of pearly white and pink blossoms. The blossoms are a testament of the friendship between the U.S. and Japan — the National Cherry Blossom Festival commemorates the gift of 3,000 cherry blossom trees by a Tokyo Mayor to Washington, D.C. in 1917. Thousands of tourists from abroad and from different parts of the U.S. flock to this area to admire the amazing blossoms.

## SUMMER ACTIVITIES

Summer is famous for lazy, hazy days. For the kids, summer is a time to sleep in since they do not have to go to school and have little homework for three whole months! This, however, is a formula for boredom and so kids are often packed off to summer camps by their parents to learn sports, art, computer, and other skills. Outdoor swimming is possible only during the summer here so the kids do lots of swimming before it gets too cold. For my family, a must is going to the Montgomery County Agricultural Fair where there are games, flea markets, animals, rides, and food. The local county fair is another quintessential American experience not to be missed. Summer is also a time where fruits and vegetables are in abundance, and so I head out to nearby farms to pick them myself. I feel in touch with nature to be able to pick fruits right off the trees or shrubs. Picking strawberries is backbreaking, but I enjoy making my own strawberry jam. I particularly enjoy picking blueberries because the height of the blueberry shrub is just perfect, no bending down required. Apple picking is available in the autumn, and it is tantalizing to think about fresh homemade apple pies (I simply buy the frozen crust and cook my own apples for the filling). Usually I pick more apples than I can bake and some of it goes into soup — never heard of apple soup? Well, apples are a great soup sweetener. I go to [www.pickyourown.org](http://www.pickyourown.org) to find out where to pick fresh vegetables and fruits.

A beach trip is almost a must for the summer. There is only a 4-month window when the beach is warm enough to enjoy. In the Washington, D.C. area, there are many beaches within a day's drive. Rehoboth Beach and Ocean City are the nearest beaches. Rehoboth is a favorite as there is a great outlet mall there so I can kill two birds with one stone — fun at the beach and shop till I drop. We also enjoy going to Virginia Beach where we can watch dolphins frolicking and go onto the pier to fish. Cape May in New Jersey is a picturesque beach town where you can take cruises and do both dolphin and whale watching. Enjoying the waves, building sandcastles, and getting hair braids (for my daughter) are all fun stuff to do at the beach. Strolling along the boardwalks, lined with shops and eating places, is an integral part of the beach experience. For me, a must is eating funnel cakes offered only during the summer months. Some of my affluent American friends own summerhouses or beach houses and spend the entire summer there. (Similarly, some Americans travel south to Florida to escape the cold winter in the north.) For the young and fearless, summer is not complete without a visit to a theme park such as Six Flags, King's Dominion, or Busch Gardens.

## LEAF PEEPING IN THE FALL

In the fall or autumn, we head for parks and do long drives to see the wondrous leaf colors — glorious hues of yellow, orange, brown, gold and red. There is a lot of excitement driving through well-planned roads lined with trees that stagger in their peaking of colors. Leaf-peepers like me feverishly check reports for the best timing to peek at leaves and take wonderful pictures for memories. We have driven through the Shenandoah National Park and even as far north as Vermont where the colors are legendary. I like pressing different

leaves and framing them up or just keeping them in heavy telephone books. After the humidity of summer in the Washington, D.C. area, the cool crisp air of fall is refreshing. Outdoor activities are fun — picnicking, biking, fishing, boating, frisbee, tennis, and the like. For golf fanatics, fall is the perfect season to play, as both the scenery and weather are enticing. There are many signature golf courses in this area, and a golfer would be spoilt for choice. Being a mediocre golf player, I prefer the executive courses, comprising mainly Par 3 holes. Once, I even brought my daughter, then seven years old, to play on an executive course. I was pleasantly surprised that she was allowed to play as long as she brings the minimum of three golf clubs and is able to answer basic questions on golf etiquette. I like the fact that I do not need to have a proficiency certificate specifying my handicap to be able to play on the golf courses in the U.S.

## PLANNING A ROAD TRIP

It is exciting to plan for a road trip and here are some pointers. For instance, if I am thinking of going to Maine for a vacation, the first thing I would do is to check [www.tripadvisor.com](http://www.tripadvisor.com) as I like the suggestions and reviews given by actual vacationers. From the reviews, I may decide to go whale-watching with Boothbay Harbor Whale Watch. The reviews also highlight that whale sightings include Finback, Minke, Humpback, and Pilot whales. If I do not get to see a whale, I would be given a rain check for another trip and this pass does not expire. The next step in my planning is to visit the Maine state tourism website which has a lot of travel information. For instance, the website provides suggestions such as exploring Maine lighthouses. I would put in a request for a free guidebook at the website. Next, I would go to [www.hotels.com](http://www.hotels.com), [www.expedia.com](http://www.expedia.com), [www.travelocity.com](http://www.travelocity.com).

com, [www.hotwire.com](http://www.hotwire.com), or [www.kayak.com](http://www.kayak.com) to check for good deals for hotels, airfare, and car rental. If I am traveling by train or bus, I would go to [www.amtrak.com](http://www.amtrak.com) or [www.greyhound.com](http://www.greyhound.com). When I am done with my bookings, I simply pack my bags and off I go!

## ART OF PARTYING

I think Americans have perfected the art of partying. Mention a party and you can count on eyes lighting up. In the U.S., all kinds of occasions are good occasions for partying. A birthday is a definite cause for celebration. During our first year in the U.S., I was amazed at the number of birthday parties that my kids were invited to. I was also intrigued by the varieties of parties that are available. My daughter has gone to a science party (where the kids do fun experiments in a lab), a horse-riding party (where the kids were introduced to all the horses in the stable and get to ride the horses), a gym party, pottery party, and corn maze outing at a farm. My son went for several laser tag parties, rock-climbing, and video arcade parties. There were also creatively planned parties held at home — the kids painted wine glasses, watched home movies, and did crafts such as decorating wood pieces, aprons and bags.

When my daughter was 13, she attended several coming-of-age parties hosted by her Jewish classmates, referred to as Bar Mitzvahs for the guys and Bat Mitzvahs for the gals. These events take place when Jewish children reach puberty at 12 or 13 years old. Tending to be lavish, these parties usually adjoin at hotels or restaurants for feasting after religious ceremonies in synagogues. My kids have also attended milestone birthday parties such as sweet 16, deemed as a momentous occasion for a girl.

In high school, there are yearly parties known as 'Homecoming' dances during the fall. 'Homecoming' is a U.S. tradition to welcome back (welcome home) all the students who have taken a break from academics during the summer. During the senior year of high school, there are many parties — an American child becomes a legal adult at 18 and is no longer considered a minor. When my son turned 18, he was advised by his peers that he could buy cigarettes, drive without a night curfew, and did not need his parents to sign permission slips for various events in school. This is also the final year that the parents have a birthday bash for the child before they head for college. And, of course, there are many rounds of farewells before high school graduates head out to college.

Americans enjoy partying and all kinds of occasions are good occasions for partying.

Parties are also held frequently at the workplace. Besides welcome parties for new co-workers and farewell parties for those who resign or retire, there are countless other reasons to celebrate. The healthcare company that I worked in held an open house party for nursing assistants who work at the homes of our clients — they can drop in any time of the day for a meal. Another company declared BOOT day and FOOT day for pizza lunch celebrations. When my puzzled friend, who is rather new to the company, asked what the acronyms stand for, he was told that BOOT is Boss Out Of Town and FOOT is Financial Officer Out of Town! I think such parties are great informal sessions for bonding with colleagues and team building though some feel that excessive partying at the office will compromise productivity.



## AMERICAN HOLIDAYS

There are the more traditional festivals that Americans get together with their families and friends for huge celebrations. My favorite is Thanksgiving, a uniquely American holiday. Thanksgiving commemorates how God provided for the pilgrims who left their homeland in the 1600s for the U.S., in search of religious freedom and a better life. The first U.S. President, George Washington, stated in the first Thanksgiving proclamation that “It is the duty of all nations to acknowledge the providence of Almighty God, to obey His will, to be grateful for His benefits, and humbly to implore His protection and favor.” These words resonate with me as I cherish a time of reflection and gratitude before God, together with my family. During the Thanksgiving period, families make a massive effort to be together to enjoy a sumptuous Thanksgiving meal with the menu centered on a roasted turkey. It is the biggest travel event of the year when Americans drive and fly to spend a weekend together. The U.S. President actually proclaims an official day of Thanksgiving on the fourth Thursday of November and this is an example:

*NOW, THEREFORE, I, GEORGE W. BUSH, President of the United States of America, by virtue of the authority vested in me by the Constitution and laws of the United States, do hereby proclaim November 27, 2008, as a National Day of Thanksgiving. I encourage all Americans to gather together in their homes and places of worship with family, friends, and loved ones to strengthen the ties that bind us and give thanks for the freedoms and many blessings we enjoy.*

*IN WITNESS WHEREOF, I have hereunto set my hand this twenty-first day of November, in the year of our Lord two thousand eight, and of the Independence of the United States of America the two hundred and thirty-third.*

GEORGE W. BUSH

Here is a piece of classic American humor related to Thanksgiving — besides proclaiming the holiday, the U.S. President pardons two turkeys during this holiday. Unlike the fate of many turkeys who end up on the dinner table, all stuffed and ready to be devoured, the pardoned turkeys are sent to either the Disneyland in California or Disney World in Florida, where they serve as the honorary grand marshals of Disney's Thanksgiving Day Parade.

Christmas is probably the biggest holiday in the U.S. Many Americans celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ with family gatherings. Since families often live in different states, Christmas is another great opportunity to come together. For some of my American friends who are married, they may go to the paternal side for Thanksgiving and then head over to maternal relatives for Christmas so as to be fair. Americans like having traditions and many hold on to the tradition of decorating their houses in an elaborate manner and going to a farm to cut a fresh pine tree for the Christmas tree. I thought it would be fun to get a live tree and did that one year but the pine needles were too much of a hassle for me to vacuum up every day, so my family is quite happy with decorating an artificial tree. It is fun to drive around the neighborhood and see houses all cheerfully decked out with festive lights and with themes centred on the nativity scene, reindeer, Santa Claus, and snowflakes.

Another unique holiday is Independence Day on the fourth of July. My family enjoys watching the National Independence Day parade which takes place in Constitution Avenue in Washington, D.C. We are surprised by the informality of the parade compared to our National Day parade. I remember one occasion when some Singaporean officials came to town to observe the parade and get some creative ideas. When they asked about the rehearsals (since we have many

rehearsals for our National Day parade), the response was: “What rehearsals? We do not have rehearsals but you are welcome to sit in for a briefing the day before the parade.” That was a culture shock for me! Maybe it is impossible to have a full rehearsal since the contingents come from all 50 states in the U.S. Also, unlike in Singapore, the President does not preside over the parade; there is just a small VIP tent from which some dignitaries can sit and view the parade. The parade is meant to be just pure fun for all the spectators and participants. I have seen mothers participating in the parade pushing shopping carts with their kids in it, and also participants marching with their suitcases in tow, holding a water bottle in the other hand. In the evening, the celebrations continue with great fireworks displays. Often there are patriotic songs accompanying the fireworks, such as *The Star-Spangled Banner* (U.S. national anthem), *God Bless America*, and *America the Beautiful*. Besides the main fireworks at the National Mall, there are mini fireworks events in many towns all over the country.

Cook-outs or barbeques is a great American tradition and it is the thing to do on Independence Day. Families come together for backyard cook-outs — Americans like having decks (wooden raised platforms) in their backyards and outdoor parties usually take place on these decks. American cook-outs are quite unlike Singapore barbeques in terms of the menu. For my American friends, cook-outs mean hamburger patties and hot dogs on the grill, and sometimes juicy pieces of steak. For our first American cookout, we brought the usual seasoned chicken wings and fish for the grill, and saw quite a few surprised looks from my American friends. They did enjoy the Singapore style BBQ though!

There are countless other occasions for partying such as St. Patrick's Day (an Irish holiday), Valentine's Day, Easter Sunday, and Halloween. During Halloween, American kids don costumes and go around the neighborhood to collect candy. I usually keep a stash of candy in my house as the little kids would come knocking on the door, saying “Trick or Treat?” My kids enjoyed their time of trick and treating when they were younger. My husband and I would always accompany them even though we live in a safe neighborhood. Seeing their candy bags being filled up is as exciting for my kids as collecting red packets during Chinese New Year. Halloween, however, focuses on the themes of witchcraft and ghosts, and this can be scary for little kids. For my husband and I, it is important that we allow our kids to have fun without participating in any negative spiritual practices.

I miss celebrating traditional Singapore holidays such as Chinese New Year. In the Washington, D.C. area, it is not widely celebrated unlike in other cities such as New York City or San Francisco where there are large Chinese populations. For my family, however, we still have our reunion dinner with friends and celebrate in a limited way with oranges and red packets.



## COUNTER LONELINESS & BUILD A SUPPORT NETWORK

Sometimes on Saturday mornings, I get tired of eating pancakes, bagels, donuts, and scrambled eggs. I long for *kway chap* or *prawn mee*. Though there are some Malaysian restaurants in this area, they do not serve breakfast. On Sundays after church, I think of the usual family gatherings at my mother-in-law's place for a scrumptious lunch and yearn for her specialty *mee hoon kuay*. Weekends can be lonely in a foreign land as family and close friends are not around. After the initial euphoria of settling in to a new place, I began to miss family and the familiarity of the Singapore home environment.

### NOT WORKING, WOKING INSTEAD

For me, it took some adjusting to be a homemaker instead of having my own career. It was liberating at first — not having to report to the office, not putting on make-up, not having to dress up. However, after a while, I missed not having a life of my own — my life now revolves around my husband and kids. My sense of significance diminished. I was doing chores around the house, grocery shopping, and cooking. It is expensive to eat out in the U.S. so I cook from Mondays to Fridays but insist on having the weekends free from cooking. However, sometimes I do end up cooking during weekends when we have friends over. Cooking was a nightmare initially, especially for the uninitiated like me. When I first started cooking, I did not even feel like eating my own meals! Thankfully there is a wide assortment of ready-made sauces and marinates available such as Prima Taste and My Mum's Cuisine — they help to halve the cooking

time and halve the fuss as well! It is a wonderful asset to be able to cook well overseas. Your friends look forward to coming to your parties and there is nothing like good conversation over a delicious meal. If you are planning to live abroad, I recommend that you beef up your cooking skills, especially on Singapore specialties, which you or other Singaporeans are going to miss. When Singaporeans gather together abroad and reminisce about the good old days in Singapore, food is always a key conversation topic — I think food ranks higher than shopping bargains. So be forewarned!

### FINDING A NETWORK OF FRIENDS

Not having family available can be a real problem, especially when you have young kids and need help with child minding. I fear falling sick — who is going to drive the kids around? Or who can help nurse me to health? I had a bad fall while ice-skating and took three months to recover — since then, I have decided not to ice-skate. I prefer to ski as I fall on soft snow instead (but there are inherent dangers in skiing as well). There are times when I need some support and my husband is unable to take leave. I usually pray that there are no medical emergencies when he has to go out of town. Hence, having a network of reliable friends is important. They become your surrogate family in a foreign land. Look for Singaporeans to connect with. Search out other Asians. Make friends with Americans. Get to know your neighbors.

#### Neighbors

Soon after I moved into my neighborhood, I baked cookies and brought them over to my immediate neighbors (thankfully, the cookie recipe I just picked up from The Washington Post turned out to be

idiot-proof, and the cookies were edible). They are a nice family — an Indian lecturer married to an American lady of Greek origin. They returned the favor and came over with Girl Scout cookies and to chat briefly. They were pleasant and polite though not extremely warm and friendly. They gave us some advice such as being careful not to open the door to strangers; they also hinted that our lawn needed some mowing. (Americans take pride in their gardens and can get annoyed if neighbors mar the landscape with untidy lawns.) Some Americans prefer their privacy and are not enthusiastic about being too familiar with their neighbors. I learnt to respect that. My neighbors were kind enough to lend the kids a sled when they saw them sledding in carton boxes down my snow-covered sloping driveway (we had not gotten round to buying a sled then). Once, when my son forgot his keys and shivered in the cold waiting for us to return home, he was able to take refuge at my neighbor's house.

I have a warm friendship with another neighbor — an Asian American family with kids about the same age as mine. We have wonderful times together. Through them, I have a deeper understanding of American Asian culture in the U.S. Theirs is a close-knit family where most of their relatives stay in the same area and interact on a frequent basis. We developed a close friendship as we share many similar values such as nurturing our kids to be the best they can be and struggling with the choice of full-time homemaking or a career. I enjoy being invited to their family gatherings — they remind me so much of the family gatherings back home which I missed — different families coming together for birthday celebrations with lots of Chinese food. We also relish the American-style barbeques at their place. It is fascinating to observe the marrying of Western and Eastern cultures in the family — much like the Peranakan culture we have back home.

Unlike Singaporeans who often socialize at restaurants, Americans like to invite friends to their home for meals, and they take the trouble to set the table with a tablecloth, lovely placemats, silverware, delicate crockery, and a nice centerpiece (usually flowers or candles) for the dining table. It is quite unlike the casual dining style in Singapore where we often eat out of disposables provided by the hawkers.

### School Connections

In the spirit of American volunteerism, I volunteer at my kids' schools, such as being a chaperon for field trips (excursions in Singapore lingo) and serving hot lunches at school. American kids usually pack a cold sandwich for lunch, and it is a treat for them to occasionally get a warm meal of pizza or hotdogs arranged by the Parent-Teacher Organization. Volunteering is a great way to meet other Americans. I became a close friend of an American lady as our boys got along well. She is married to an Asian American husband, and we feel an almost instantaneous affinity. As our boys had frequent play dates and sleepovers during middle school, our families interacted constantly. The cuisine that she served us during those wonderful dinners at her home reflected the fusion of cultures in her family. I remember distinctly that her husband made Chinese dumplings for appetizer while she whipped up an unforgettable American crab dip, piping hot from the oven. When invited to a dinner party, I usually bring dessert, wine, or a small gift. Besides this family, I have also nurtured wonderful friendships with a few other women as we meet weekly to pray for the high school that our teenagers go to.

Many of my American friends are great cooks since they entertain at home often. They are proud of their special recipes, especially recipes passed down from parents and grandparents. A great compliment to the host would be to ask for the recipe because that indicates that you enjoyed the dish tremendously.

### Singapore/Malaysian Community

My main support group is a cluster of Singaporean and Malaysian families living in the vicinity. There is a special bond among friends when you are abroad. Back home in Singapore, we are so preoccupied with the business of daily living that we do not have time for leisurely conversations with friends. Our families and extended families take up a big chunk of our time — birthdays, weddings, house-warming parties, festive celebrations — my weekends in Singapore were taken up with such activities. Over here in the U.S., friendship takes on a greater significance. It really warms my heart that someone who is not related to us by blood ties would go the extra mile for us when we are in need. I will always remember the kindness of friends who cooked for me and picked up my kids from school when I was ill on a few occasions.

Having been in the U.S. for more than 10 years, my husband and I now try to help others who are new to this area. Our home has become a nucleus of sorts — we host a Christian book club meeting every fortnight and have gotten to know many Singaporeans and Malaysians who live in the Washington, D.C. area. An exciting highlight of the book club is supper! We usually serve the local comfort food of Singapore and Malaysia — *bak kut teh*, *rojak*, *chicken curry*, *fried beehoon*, etc. Besides helping new families to settle in,

we also provide support such as child-sitting, dog-sitting, cooking for those who are sick, and car-pooling. We try to be there for our friends on those occasions when family support is needed, such as piano recitals, birthdays, anniversaries, and graduation parties.

The ladies who are not working tend to have a stronger bond of friendship than the husbands. Most of us face an empty house for a few hours a day when the kids are in school and husbands at work. While it is wonderful to have time on our hands, we are sometimes overwhelmed by loneliness and boredom. So it is great when there are friends to chat with, to walk with, and to lunch with. We share our experiences in the new environment that we are all adapting to and exchange ideas on how to help our kids cope. Sometimes, we plan out of town trips and travel together as families. We also discuss our leisure exploits — recommending great places to visit and interesting events to go to.

### Church

The Singapore community that we foster friendships with is largely a transient community. Usually, they are on work postings or are studying in the Washington, D.C. area for a few years. Our alternative support group is the local church that we attend. While attending a Baptist church in the vicinity of our home, we built up an enriching relationship with a wonderfully wholesome American family. They have five kids that they call the M & Ms since all their names start with the letter 'M'! They led the Bible discussion group we hosted at our house for several years. They shared their insights on the Bible and we in turn shared Singapore food with them. I also obtained great American recipes from them.



Currently, we attend a Chinese-based church and feel at home there. Unlike the first American church we attended which has less than 20 youths, this Chinese church has a sizeable youth group of 150 youths. My kids have made some wonderful and lasting friendships among the many Asian American kids. At youth gatherings, they sometimes get to eat Chinese food such as dumplings and noodles instead of the usual American fare of pizzas, donuts, and bagels. While American kids usually address me as Mrs. Tan, the Chinese church kids call me Auntie Lydia and that reminds me of Singapore where everyone older than us is 'Auntie' or 'Uncle.' We have great friendships with several families in church as we share the same cultural values and aspirations for our kids.

I also teach an English conversation class at another local church and have gotten to meet many ladies from different Asian countries. I have a support group through volunteering at Community Bible Study, a non-denominational bible study for those who live in the community. Check out [www.communitybiblestudy.org](http://www.communitybiblestudy.org) for groups in your area as they have bible study groups all over the U.S.

### **Singapore/Malaysia Clubs**

Search out Singapore or Singapore/Malaysia clubs in your area. For us, there is no Singapore club in this area but there is the Singapore Embassy located in Washington, D.C. We are registered with the Embassy and are on their mailing list. The Embassy usually hosts functions to celebrate National Day, Christmas, and Chinese New Year functions. At these functions, we get comfort food and also meet other Singaporeans who live in the Washington, D.C. area. I have met Singaporeans at such functions who have become my close friends. The nearest Singapore club is in New York City so I joined the New York Singapore Association and get emails on their

activities. However, since New York is a good four-hour drive away, I have not attended any of the club activities yet. Finding a home away from home does take some effort when you are overseas, but it is a worthwhile adventure that will yield many new friendships, some of whom will become friends for life.

## **FOOD THE COMFORT FACTOR**

Food is a great source of comfort when I miss home. It is possible to be abysmally downcast when I do not get to eat all the wonderful hawkers' center food or family favorites that I am used to. I think it is not just the food but also the memories evoked with Singapore food. I can empathize with Anton Ego, the food critic in the movie *Ratatouille* when, after tasting a bite of ratatouille (a traditional French stewed vegetable dish), he was brought back in time to the coziness of his mother's kitchen and the security of home. At gatherings with Singaporeans and Malaysians, there is great excitement when we share food that reminds us of the warmth of family back home. When I was in Singapore, I took that for granted since there is such an abundance of food everywhere.

### **Asian Groceries**

My friends and I take great delight in sharing our food exploits, be it recipes or some great finds that we saw at the grocery or a new eating place that offers the familiar food of home. Part of the beauty of living in the Washington, D.C. area is that it is easy to get food that is close to our Singapore cuisine. We have scoured Asian supermarkets in the area and found items such as made-in-Singapore frozen prata, made-in-Malaysia fishballs, Yeo's curry, Ribena, and Milo. If there are no Asian grocery shops in your area, you can order online from

websites such as [www.asianfoodgrocer.com](http://www.asianfoodgrocer.com) and [www.veryasia.com](http://www.veryasia.com). The veryasia website even has a segment on Singapore/Malaysia sauces.

### Singapore and Malaysian Restaurants

For my family, our hawkers' center equivalent is the Malaysian Penang restaurant nearby. Invariably, we will order *roti canai* that reminds us of *roti prata* in Singapore. We never fail to get a helping of the seafood *horfun* as it makes us think of *zi char* back home. We would reminisce about the family weekly routine on Friday nights when we would head to a coffee shop in Bukit Batok for *horfun*, fried rice, and sizzling hot plate tofu. The prices in the U.S. are definitely not as palatable, but I have gone beyond lamenting that I need to fork out S\$12 for *horfun* instead of S\$5. There is a price to pay for the comfort of Singapore food overseas!

The Malaysian Penang restaurant that I frequent is part of a Malaysian-owned chain of restaurants that serve delicious Malaysian cuisine similar to Singapore cuisine. I am amazed at how consistent the food is and it never fails to satisfy my cravings for local food. You can google 'Penang' or 'Malaysia' or 'Nyonya.' I know of about 12 such restaurants in different parts of the U.S., and I have gone to restaurants in Chicago, Philadelphia, New York Chinatown, North Carolina, and Boston. For the area that you live in, you may be able to find authentic Singapore restaurants. For instance, there are several Singapore/Malaysia restaurants in California where there is a bigger population of Asians.

### Singapore Sauces

I have yet to find a restaurant that serves *laksa* and Singapore chilli crab. Hence, I have learnt to whip up these dishes myself with the

help of authentic Singapore sauces. I make sure that I stock up on Singapore premixes during my summer trips home. My suitcases will be invariably filled with Prima Taste sauces, My Mum's Cuisine packs, and other must-haves. If I run out of these premixes, there is a supplier in California, HC Foods, that I can order from. With these authentic made-in-Singapore sauces, I am able to whip up *laksa*, *mee siam*, *mee rebus*, and other hawker favorites somewhat effortlessly. Eating Singapore food will definitely help ease pangs of homesickness. For those chef wannabees who are adventurous enough to cook from scratch, you can check out blogspots of Malaysians/Singaporeans living in the U.S. that feature tried and tested recipes using ingredients available here. My favorite website is Lily's Wai Sek Hong, [www.lilyng2000.blogspot.com](http://www.lilyng2000.blogspot.com). There are great pictures to guide you along, and she also gives wonderful advice if you need help. I have even learnt how to make *bak kwa* from her website!

## SURVIVAL RECIPES (SINGAPORE STYLE)

I have a word of caution about the Standard American Diet, also known as SAD. It is indeed a sad and inadequate diet that is packed with empty calories and minimal nutrition. I am referring to a diet of fast food (hamburgers and hotdogs) and microwave dinners. There are, however, some wholesome American recipes such as home-cooked stews and nutritious casseroles. I am persuaded that food is directly related to health, and it is worth the time and effort to prepare a nourishing meal. To me, the adage of Hippocrates, "let food be thy medicine and medicine be thy food" makes a lot of sense. Some of my friends described their stint in the U.S. as a 10-lb. posting since it is entirely possible to put on that much weight if one were to survive on a SAD diet. The following is a sampling of survival recipes that are easy to cook (just 30 minutes):

### Quick Chicken Rice

Chicken broth (32 fl.oz.)  
 10 cloves of garlic  
 10 slices of ginger  
 Rice (one cup)  
 Quarter of a cabbage (sliced)  
 Half a rotisserie chicken (from your favorite grocery store)  
 Cucumber and tomato (sliced)  
 Cilantro (for garnishing)

1. Boil the garlic and ginger in the chicken broth for 15 minutes, add salt to taste.
2. Add cabbage and boil for 3 minutes.
3. Boil 1 cup of rice, using 1½ cups of the flavored chicken broth.
4. Serve rice with the chopped-up rotisserie chicken, cucumber, tomato, cilantro, and a bowl of cabbage soup.

### Mui Fan (Brown Gravy over Rice)

Chicken broth (16 fl.oz.)  
 Corn flour (2 tbsp.)  
 Green vegetables (spinach, *chye sim*, or *bak choy*)  
 Prawns or fish cake or sliced chicken  
 Sliced fresh button mushrooms (or canned mushrooms)  
 Egg  
 Cooked rice (one cup)  
 Salt, light and dark soya sauce to taste

1. Bring chicken broth to a boil, add green vegetables, prawns, and mushrooms and cook for three minutes.
2. Add soya sauce, salt and corn flour.
3. Break an egg into the gravy.
4. Pour gravy over cooked rice.

### Turkey Kiam Chye Soup

Skinless turkey thigh meat (1 lb.)  
 1 pack of *kiam chye* (available from Asian groceries)  
 10 slices of ginger  
 3 medium tomatoes (sliced)  
 Salt, sugar and white pepper to taste

1. Fry the ginger slices till fragrant.
2. Boil all the ingredients in 4 cups of water (or chicken broth) for 30 minutes or till the turkey meat is tender (use duck if available).  
 Eat with rice or just enjoy the soup.

### Durian Puffs

Frozen Thai montong durian (from Asian groceries)  
 Sugar to taste  
 Frozen Belgian cream puffs

1. Thaw durian and cook with sugar. Allow it to cool.
2. Slice the cream puffs halfway and spoon in half a teaspoon of durian into the cream puff. (Everyone thinks that I filled the entire cream puff with durian when it is just a small morsel! Sure to please Singaporean durian lovers, and some adventurous Americans like it too.)



## RACIAL SENSITIVITIES

*Until justice is blind to color, until education is unaware of race, until opportunity is unconcerned with the color of men's skins, emancipation will be a proclamation but not a fact.*

— President Lyndon B. Johnson, U.S. President (1963–1969)

When I took up a desktop publishing course at a community college, the no-nonsense Professor gave me a look on my first day of class that made me feel uncomfortable. I felt offended when she muttered skeptically that she hoped my grammar skills were strong, as good grammar was a pre-requisite for this course. She was pleasantly surprised when I aced all my assignments, with good grammar to boot — she had probably stereotyped me as an Asian who does not speak or write good English.

Race plays a big part in the U.S. culture. Being informed about racial issues will help you to be sensitive to Americans of different races so you will not stumble into racial minefields because of sheer ignorance. Caucasians or Anglo-Saxons are white while the rest of us are sometimes labeled 'colored.' This encompasses Asians, African Americans, and Latinos. I do not relish being called 'colored' — I think it is derogatory and connotes a sense of impurity that we are not pure white. For me, being called Asian or Chinese is fine. I like living in the Washington, D.C. area as there is such a hodge-podge of different ethnicities here. Hence, I do not feel out of place as an Asian in this area. For my friends living in other parts of the U.S. that are predominantly white, they sometimes feel out of place.

There are many immigrants in the greater Washington, D.C. area, and the immigration continues unabated. About 50% of the population in this area are Caucasians, 25% are African Americans, and the rest are mainly Hispanics and Asians. Though the residents here are exposed to many races, there continues to be some stereotyping along ethnic lines, just like what my Professor did. White police officers are sometimes accused of targeting African Americans as criminal suspects. Latinos feel outraged that they are often thought to be illegal residents. Racial profiling for law enforcement purposes remains controversial. This happens at the airport as well — it is alleged that some are singled out for the secondary screening such as a pat-down body search because of their race. (If you see SSSS on your boarding pass, it means that you are slated for a body search, and your carry-on luggage will be searched too. My advice is to just be pleasant and refrain from making inappropriate jokes. When my friend joked that he worked as an arms dealer, he was promptly hustled away for a strip search!) For Asians in the U.S., they are generally seen as not being competent in oral skills or talented in the liberal arts. They tend to study hard sciences and take on IT, engineering, and accountancy-related jobs. Indeed, very few of my kids' Asian friends choose English Literature or Political Science as their majors in college — it is just not common for Asians to take up courses relating to politics or involving oratorical skills.

Despite the recurrent incidents that indicate racial stereotyping, I am hopeful about the state of ethnic relations in the U.S. This is a country that has regretted its past mistakes of racial injustice through slavery and I see a genuine desire to uphold the American ideal that emphasizes equality of race. There is special effort to ensure that racism does not rear its ugly head and that when it does, which is not infrequent, the racism ogre gets a bashing on its head. American

officials and right-thinking Americans do not want to discriminate against others on the basis of race. It is also seen as politically incorrect.

While open discrimination is not allowed, discrimination based on race takes place subtly. In the U.S., resumes do not need to specify information such as race, age, and gender since employers are not allowed to discriminate against a candidate based on all those factors. Sometimes, it is only when the interviewee arrives that the race would be evident. Most companies would take steps to ensure that discrimination is not practiced. However, I am not sure if companies do that because they firmly believe in the equality of races or if they are simply deterred by the stiff penalties. Maybe it is a combination of both factors. America has gone through decades of anti-discrimination litigation. I learnt from a realtor friend that a particular real estate firm had its license suspended when it was found guilty of racial prejudice. The incident went as follows: a white female had called the real estate firm looking for a job and was told that there were no vacancies; she was told to send in her resume so that she can be contacted should there be an opening. An African American female phoned the same real estate firm and was similarly informed that there were no positions open but the difference was that she was not told to send in her resume. Apparently these two calls were bogus calls by a law enforcement agency — the real estate company failed the test and faced the dire consequence of license suspension. There are pockets of racism in the American workplace, and such cases are usually highlighted and denounced by the watchdog media, especially if big companies are involved.

My children attended an Episcopalian school that prides itself on providing a culturally diverse environment for education. It provides

scholarships to minority students so that some kids from the lower income homes can be educated in private Christian schools. Many institutions tout diversity as a selling point for their programs. It is generally believed that kids who grow up in a multi-ethnic environment are more in touch with the real world and have greater chances for success in the future. In the Episcopalian school, kids learn to befriend other kids from different ethnic backgrounds, and this tends to be easier the younger they are. Such kids will be better positioned for the real world when they eventually enter a racially diverse workforce. For me, it was wonderful to see my young children embracing African Americans, Caucasians, Latinos, and Asians as their buddies. Their innocent and young minds were not tainted by suspicion and discrimination. They did not think of one another primarily in colors and tended to accept their classmates without pre-conceived ideas.

In my daughter's high school, there is a mix of Caucasians, Asians, and African Americans. My daughter is generally happy with race relations in school though cliques tend to form along racial lines — 'preppy' (denotes well-groomed, rich, and somewhat snobbish) white groups, nerdy Asian groups, and African American students who live mainly in a cluster of townhouses in the area. For my daughter, she became keenly aware of racial issues when a fight broke out at the school cafeteria one day. Apparently, two African American boys had a squabble over a girlfriend and began a fistfight. It was the principal's comments on the issue that led to a hullabaloo — she characterized the incident as 'black-on-black violence.' Many African American parents protested at the insensitive words and she quickly apologized for the comment. To her credit, the principal made a concerted effort to promote greater understanding among the ethnically different students. She initiated a series of study circle discussions on race, and



my daughter was selected to represent the Asian voice in the study circles to discuss problems in race relations.

The University of Maryland that my son attended is rich in diversity. Other universities in this area may not be so culturally diverse. For instance, the University of Richmond in Virginia has a more homogeneous student culture, being dominated by middle-class whites. Since diversity is generally seen as desirable, many universities may make special effort to take in minority students. The entrance requirements may be relaxed for races that are not well represented in the student body.

According to population estimates, whites are still the majority and make up about 65% of the total U.S. population. The idea of white supremacy still exists today though increasingly, it takes on subtle forms. I feel that the racist views that some white Americans have are due to their lack of exposure to the world outside the U.S. American media focuses on local issues of concern to Americans and does not provide adequate coverage of world news. I was surprised to learn that only a small percentage of Americans own passports and have traveled abroad. However, there are probably more well traveled Americans in the Washington, D.C. area than in rural and small town America.

Among the minority races, African Americans have a special place in American history. While some are free from the shackles of history, many still live under the heavy burden of their past slavery. There remains a deep racial divide between the white man and the black man. While the relationship between whites and blacks has improved tremendously, emotional hang-ups of the past continue to pervade American society. Many African Americans are still trapped in a

cycle of poverty. For them, the cycle is perpetuated by high rates of school dropout, illiteracy, and teen pregnancy. These social problems result in many African Americans not completing high school and hence, a low percentage goes on to college. Without a decent education, they will be stuck in low-income jobs. This in turn leads to continued tension between blacks and whites — the perception that the white man is suppressing the black man would persist. Bill Crosby, a well-respected actor, has been outspoken in urging fellow African Americans to stop blaming whites for their troubles and instead pull up their own socks. His take is that African Americans should be responsible for their own development instead of making excuses for their social problems.

I spoke to a Caucasian friend about her views on race and it surprised me that some white Americans carry a burden for the racial injustice that was perpetuated in the past. Our chat took place just before the 2008 Presidential Elections — she wanted Barack Obama to win, as it would exonerate whites from discriminating against African Americans. Even during her school days, she wished that her African American friends would win competitions and awards — she felt the guilt of the past and wanted her colored friends to be compensated and to be successful. Hence, some Americans support affirmative action — this refers to policies that help minorities, such as African Americans and Native Americans, get ahead in life. Under such schemes, minorities may be given priority for admission to colleges, for employment, and for business contracts by the federal government. This policy is somewhat controversial. Some minorities do not like the perception that they succeeded not on their own merit but because they have been given special privileges. Some whites feel that the concept itself is unfair and that they are disadvantaged when preferential treatment is given to the underdog.

Besides racial tension between the majority and minority groups, there is animosity among the different minority groups as well. As an Asian, I sense some animosity between African Americans and Asian Americans. I have many good experiences relating to African Americans but sense that some African Americans seem to resent the fact that Asians are relatively wealthier and better educated. Asians place a high premium on education and tend to be upwardly mobile. I have heard of African American resentment against Asians expressed in subtle ways — my Asian friends have related to me negative experiences such as African American service personnel discriminating against Asians. According to one friend, she bought a Happy Meal at McDonald's and requested for a girl's toy. The African American cashier claimed that they had run out of girls' toys and handed her a boy's toy instead. Shortly after, an African American customer came along and was able to get a girl's toy! My friend was still within earshot and was annoyed by the blatant discrimination. Tension between minority races may well lead to social unrest which was what happened during the Los Angeles riots — Korean businesses were the target of African American arsonists.

The increasing numbers of Hispanics (also referred to as Latinos since most are of Latin American origin) in the U.S. has become a racially-charged issue as well. Many Americans are unhappy that a huge number are illegal immigrants, and that they drain taxpayers' resources in using public amenities such as schools and hospitals. America remains a generous society and hence, the kids of illegal immigrants are allowed to go to public schools (free for students but the state foots an annual bill of about US\$10,000 per child). The rationale is that the kids should not be disadvantaged because of their parents' actions. There is also unhappiness that many Hispanics do not speak English and hence, public services have to cater to their

needs in having interpreters and printing materials in Spanish. The resentment has gone so deep that a Philadelphia cheese steak cafe posted this sign 'This is America. When ordering, speak English.' An emotive outburst followed — the owner was criticized and received threats for allegedly discriminating against Hispanics.

America will continue to wrestle with race relations for many years to come. During the inauguration of Barack Obama as the 44<sup>th</sup> President on January 20, 2009, Reverend Joseph E. Lowery ended his benediction with these words:

*Lord, in the memory of all the saints who from their labors rest, and in the joy of a new beginning, we ask you to help us work for that day when black will not be asked to get (in) back, when brown can stick around ... when yellow will be mellow ... when the red man can get ahead, man; and when white will embrace what is right. Let all those who do justice and love mercy say Amen.*

I thought that this benediction took a humorous swipe at the racial stereotypes but was surprised to learn that some find it offensive. You would have noticed that I try to use terms such as African Americans and Asian Americans. In the U.S., I have to be careful about racial terms — 'African American' is polite, 'black' is not polite, 'negro' is rude and 'nigger' is taboo. Similarly, Asians resent being referred to as 'chinks.' The racial scene can be a minefield so it is wise to tread carefully on sensitive racial issues.

Other than minor incidents that highlight my race as a Chinese and a non-white, the race issue does not bother me much. I do my part to treat people of all races equally and am mindful of what might offend

others. When I do encounter some small-minded persons who see themselves as racially (or even socially) superior, I would spend minimal time in their company. There are many other fair-minded Americans whose friendships I enjoy and I choose to interact with them. Since I am a 'Resident Alien' and not a citizen of this country, I do not take it upon myself to try to change things around here. I share the optimism of Colin Powell, the former U.S. Secretary of State, that America strives to be racially blind:

*In one generation we have moved from denying a black man service at a lunch counter to elevating one to the highest military office in the country, and to being a serious contender for the presidency. This is a magnificent country and I am proud to be one of its sons.*



## U.S. POLITICS — IT'S A MAZE!

It was two weeks to the 2008 Presidential Election. The Washington, D.C. area was abuzz with political activity. Having read that the voter turnout for Americans is not substantial, about 50-55%, I curiously asked my friend if she was going to vote. "Definitely!" she replied. She was due to go to New York City to celebrate her wedding anniversary but will delay her departure so she could cast her vote first. According to my friend, the voter turnout in the Washington, D.C. area is higher than that in many other parts of the U.S., the reason being that many jobs in this area are tied in to the federal government. For her husband's job, it is critical that the Democrats win this election.

### POLITICAL PARTIES

Many Americans have strong political views. If you live in this area, you cannot avoid conversations on politics. Hence, it is better to be in the know instead of having a blank look on your face when politics is discussed. Besides, many American jokes are tied in to politics so why not get 'politically educated' and enjoy a few laughs. Elephants and donkeys — these symbols dominate the political scene in the U.S. The elephant symbolizes the Republicans while the donkey represents the Democrats. President Barack Obama from the Democratic Party won the 2008 Presidential Election and is serving a 4-year term. Before that, the Republican Party led by President George Bush controlled the White House for two terms, from 2001–2009. I find it surprising that in a robust democracy like the U.S., there are only two mainstream political parties and no viable third parties. A small party known as the Green Party, led by a green advocate Ralph Nader,

has made only small inroads in state elections but minimal impact on a national level.

Why are a donkey and an elephant the symbols of the Democrats and Republicans? These symbols were used by a political cartoonist Thomas Nast in the 1800s, and somehow the symbols stuck.

## CONGRESS AND THE PRESIDENT

Besides the post of President, Republicans and Democrats vie for positions in the Congress, which comprises two legislative chambers — the House of Representatives and the Senate. These two bodies make the laws while the White House executes the laws. The House of Representatives comprises members who represent a district within a state — these members are known as congressmen. In contrast, the Senate consists of members who represent the entire state they come from — they are called senators. The House of Representatives (usually referred to as the House) is made up of 435 representatives who serve 2-year terms. The 50 states have varying numbers of congressmen depending on the population of each state. Currently, the state with the most congressmen is California, based on its population of about 37 million that translates to 53 congressmen. Conversely, there are several states that have only one congressman due to their small population.

Unlike the House, the Senate comprises 100 members, with exactly two senators representing each of the 50 states, regardless of the population size of the states. Hence, smaller states such as Delaware,

Rhode Island, and Connecticut have two senators representing them just like the bigger states of California, Texas, and New York. Unlike congressmen who have 2-year tenures, senators are elected every six years.

It is an ingenious system of legislature. Both legislative bodies are responsible for passing bills that may eventually become law. However, the House of Representatives and the Senate are structured differently — they are bound by different considerations and have different ways of conducting business. The House represents the common people and deals with the more immediate concerns of their constituents as congressmen represent a particular district and are elected for just a 2-year term. In contrast, the Senate tends to embrace a broader and longer-term view of issues — the reasons being that senators serve 6-year terms, and that they serve the entire state, not just one constituency. The structure of the two legislative bodies has the effect of a countercheck and balance against each other. The House tends to be more agile in its response to the demands of the public while the Senate checks against the pressures of public opinion. As one journalist William S. White puts it, “The House marches; the Senate thinks, and sometimes overlong.”

There is a similar system of check and balance between these two legislative bodies that propose the laws and the executive branch responsible for ensuring that the laws passed by Congress are carried out. The President of the United States is the chief executive of the Government who oversees the implementation of laws. He appoints the 15 cabinet ministers who constitute the executive branch of the U.S. Government. These 15 appointees, known as secretaries, oversee the 15 Cabinet departments (in Singapore lingo, secretaries are ministers e.g. the U.S. Secretary of State is the equivalent of the Minister of Foreign Affairs).

The President has immense powers. Besides being the chief executive of the Government, he is also the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces. The President may ask Congress to declare war, for instance, the war against terrorism. He makes all key decisions with regard to the military services and decides how to conduct war. The President has the authority to endorse or veto bills proposed by Congress. If he signs the bills, they become law. If he vetoes the bills, Congress may override the veto by a two-thirds vote of both the House and the Senate. Besides appointing the Cabinet, the President also decides on other key appointments, namely the Supreme Court judges, and Chiefs of the Army, Navy, and Air Force. He sets the tone for foreign policy and appoints all ambassadors to foreign countries.

## PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

I have been puzzled by the quirks of the election process and hope to clarify things for you since I have witnessed three Presidential Elections. The U.S. has a special system governing the election of the President and Vice President. Contrary to popular notions of democracy, the presidential election is not determined by the popular vote but by a peculiar system called the Electoral College. The Electoral College is not an institution but a group of electors chosen by the voters in each state. The number of electors in a state is the sum of the number of congressmen and the two senators from the state. For instance, Florida has 25 congressmen and two senators and hence it has 27 electors translated into 27 electoral votes. The total number of congressmen is 435 and the total number of senators is 100, giving a sum total of 535 electors. However, the Twenty-third Amendment added three electors for the District of Columbia (commonly referred to as Washington, D.C.); hence the grand total of

electors in the Electoral College is 538. A presidential candidate must win the absolute majority of votes in the state — he then gets all of the electoral votes for that state, as there is a winner-takes-all policy. (There are variations to this rule in a few states.) To win the election, a candidate must get the majority of the 538 electoral votes, that is, 270 votes. The presidential candidate who wins the election is sworn in on January 20 following the November Presidential Election.

During the last three Presidential Elections, I have watched the events unfold with keen interest. For the 2000 election, there was a lot of political commotion as the vote count was uncomfortably close. This resulted in vote counts being challenged, and I believe the whole world learned about hanging chads (much like the chads that we tear for Singapore car coupons). Ultimately, the Supreme Court was called upon to make the crucial decision on who won the Presidency. The Supreme Court ended the 6-week dispute by ruling in favor of President George W. Bush. This episode highlighted for me that Americans observe the rule of law and accept the ruling of the highest court in the land. My husband commented that in some other countries, the military might of the political factions would have determined the outcome. For me, it also emphasized the power wielded by Supreme Court judges — no wonder Presidents select Supreme Court judges with care since their judgment is crucial in legal disputes including decisions on the Presidency. Supreme Court judges are also carefully selected as their tenures are for life.

Besides elections on the federal level, there are appointments and elections on a state level too. The highest authority in a state is the Governor, and many Presidents were Governors before they ran for presidency, including President George W. Bush (former Governor of Texas) and late President Ronald Reagan (former Governor of



California). The Governor runs the state just like the U.S. President runs the country.

## U.S. CONSTITUTION

To understand Americans, it is important to understand the rights that they have in the U.S. Constitution, particularly the Bill of Rights. This document contains the first 10 amendments added to the constitution in 1791, and these are key laws. Among the laws, the First, Second, and Fifth Amendments to the Constitution are often cited. The First Amendment enshrines freedom — it gives people the freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom to meet together in groups, and to ask the government for help. This amendment guarantees religious freedom and prevents Congress from establishing an official religion for the nation. The words of the late Senator Edward M. Kennedy underscore this freedom:

*I hope for an America where no president, no public official, no individual will ever be deemed a greater or lesser American because of religious doubt — or religious belief.*

— Senator Edward M. Kennedy

The Second Amendment gives people the right to own guns to protect themselves. It reads as: “A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed.” The ability to own a gun has deep roots in American history. Thomas Jefferson proposed that “no free man shall ever be debarred the use of arms.” Many patriotic Americans hold on tenaciously to this Amendment though there have been numerous public debates about limiting the ownership of guns.

The Fifth Amendment is frequently invoked when a person chooses not to speak so as not to incriminate himself. In essence, the Fifth Amendment protects the people's rights by requiring that a grand jury decide if there is enough evidence to charge a person with a serious crime; it protects a person from being tried twice for the same crime and from having to testify against himself. It also prevents the government from taking away a person's property without paying a fair price for it. Basically, you claim the Fifth Amendment when you want to remain silent and not speak on an issue.

My kids learnt early in their stay here that the First and Fifth Amendments are very useful. They declared, “I claim the Fifth!” when I asked them about their test scores. They were similarly quick to claim their freedom to talk that is guaranteed by the First Amendment — “Mom, I've got an idea for spring break, you've got to listen to this!”

## GUNS

Singaporeans find it difficult to understand the passion of Americans for guns, and I hope that this segment will throw some light on that. A retired army officer and a marksman, my husband is fascinated by the range of handguns available commercially and the easy availability of ammunition in sports shops. Many Americans cherish their right, under the Second Amendment, to possess and use firearms, both for self-defense and for recreational purposes.

A friend surprised us in her response to a polite question on how her weekend went — she said she was at her father's ranch in Texas where she took out her handgun and did some practice rounds. That, to us,

did not seem like an ordinary weekend! Our friend is a southerner and in the southern states especially, gun ownership is treasured and game hunting is prevalent. When we bought our house from an elderly American-Italian couple, I was intrigued that they had a rifle cabinet in the basement — the husband used his rifles to hunt deer. I recall an animated conversation I had with another American — he spoke excitedly about how he spent his weekend hunting game in Virginia and that he grinded the meat of the deer himself and made some venison burgers on the grill. Many Americans are passionate about their right to own guns and would do all they can to ensure that they continue to have this right. Others are appalled by the violent crimes resulting from firearms being so freely available and want to see restrictions on gun ownership.

Coming from Singapore, which considers the possession of firearms as a serious crime, I am worried about the easy access to guns in the U.S. The national statistics are that about one in four Americans personally own guns. Some of my American friends tell me that they keep a gun in the glove compartment of the car. It seems that almost any adult can get hold of a gun, especially if it is purchased at a gun show. Some states have lax regulations on gun control, though there are other states that do criminal background checks before allowing purchase of firearms. There are many horror stories in the news about kids getting access to their parents' guns and then bringing the guns to school. There are sad incidents where people are killed over minor incidents such as road rage and drunkards stumbling into the wrong house. My kids volunteer at a non-profit organization in Washington, D.C. that runs programs for inner city kids, and they find it heart-wrenching to learn that all the kids who attend the programs have lost at least one family member to gunshot. The right to possess arms has not been well regulated leading to abuse of this privilege, and

the tragic results are unnecessary injuries and loss of lives. It also contributes to a fear culture in the U.S. — people fear for their lives as weapons are easily available. President Obama is believed to favor restrictions on gun control and has decried gun violence:

*Our playgrounds have become battlegrounds. Our streets have become cemeteries. Our schools have become places to mourn the ones we've lost. The violence is unacceptable, and it's got to stop.*

— Barack Obama (July 2007 while campaigning for the presidency)

Despite my discomfort about guns, I have come to understand why Americans cherish this right. The British denied them this right to own guns to defend themselves and hence when the Americans attained independence, they cherish this right. Also, some Americans live in inaccessible areas where the police would not be able to reach easily in an emergency. Therefore, they need to be able to protect their own families and properties. Being armed also means being able to secure their personal freedom, including freedom from a government that may be corrupted and oppressive. In the American mindset, ultimate authority should rest with the people and not with the elected officials.





Please visit my blog,  
<http://usainsideinfo.blogspot.com/>

- for other vignettes of American life not covered in this book
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