

It was a Sunday night. I think, I don't really remember. The fear of missing my plane flight was real, looming over me as I waited. I was nine years old, watching cartoons in the middle of the night, tired and about to fall asleep. I was so sure that I would stay awake. I was probably dreaming about food and the cartoons I was watching. I feel someone shake me, being very loud, "Hurry up and get your stuff cause we late", it was my father waking me up. To be honest I felt like it was my fault because I said I would be staying up so that we could be early. In all my life up until this point I've never felt my heart beating so fast. We rush to get in the car and we drive off, possibly obeying the traffic laws or not. After about a 20 minute drive, we make it on time.

We board the plane and start to get comfortable. The plane ride from Jamaica to Miami was a blur for me because I was asleep the whole time. My father and I landed in Miami, and I was confused at first because I thought we finally made it to New York. I never knew what a connecting flight was until that point. The wait for our next flight was about 2-3 hours, and I don't know how my father kept a nine year old entertained for that long, nor do I remember what I did during that wait. The next thing I remember was arriving at New York and wondering, "why is it so cold? What is that white powder falling like rain?". It was my first time experiencing winter and seeing snow. Never could I imagine how cold it was. Coming from a Caribbean island where it's always hot, I never knew that it could even be this cold. What made it worse was that I was slightly underdressed and we had to wait for my mom to get home and let us inside. After another long wait, I saw someone walking up the block in a bright red jacket, "Is that mommy" I said and I ran to hug her. She took us inside so that we could warm up and thus started my journey in America.

In the days leading up to coming to America, I was never told the reason as to why we were leaving our old life behind. Initially my father told me that we were just staying for about two weeks, convincing me it was just like a vacation but not during summer. During the first two weeks I was just relaxing, watching T.V., sleeping, eating, feeling very relaxed. About two days before the two weeks were over I was asking if I should pack my stuff back in my bag so that we could be ready for our flight back home. My parents gave me a look of confusion, and that's when I found out we were not going back to our home country. I then learn that my parents have been looking for a school to enroll me in. I felt in a way devastated because I really wanted to go back and see my old friends. They found a school that would accept me after I took a placement test evaluating my current skills. After I took the test I was placed into the C class which was referred to as the "smartest/gifted" class. Thankfully though this time gifted meant smart and not special needs. Transitioning into a new school was rough but I had to get used to America. I was eventually told that the real reason we came to America was "for a better life", the common reason all if not most immigrants say. I still never believed that our lives in our home country were in any way bad.

My life in Jamaica never seemed hard for me. Maybe it was due to my parents being good at hiding it from me. I never had to worry about going to sleep hungry, nor worry about money issues. I had everything a child could have wanted, toys, video games, and movies. I can only speculate the reason why I wasn't told upfront that we weren't coming back. Simply put, a nine year old wouldn't take that so well when they think their life is already good.

In America, I had to start out from scratch, with no friends and in an unfamiliar place. Even though I started school in the middle of fourth grade, I was able to keep up with the topics they were on, aside from a slight language barrier. In the Caribbean, many words like color are

spelt differently, colour, tyre, centre, grey, and analyse were just some of the few words I had to relearn. For the first few weeks I was bullied for my accent, even though I spoke “proper” English, I guess it was the wrong English because it wasn’t American. Everyday that I went home, I felt lonely and wanted to go back to my home country, where I am accepted and have friends. Sadly, or maybe thankfully my parents never took us back and I had to just deal with it. I mainly started to make friends only a few months after I came to America, at the start of fifth grade. The slight name-calling amongst children was still there, but I managed to make some friends that didn’t really care about that. Most of my fifth grade was spent getting used to the American school system and how different it was. We didn’t have to stand to respond to questions, and the teachers weren’t as strict. Looking back on it I was laughed at the first time I stood to answer a question. In a classroom with 40 eyes staring at you, making jokes, lets just say that I didn’t feel too happy about it. My first two years in America were a blur, I mainly remember how hard it was on me emotionally.

When sixth grade started, I kept learning more and more about the different opportunities in America, being fed information supporting the idea that America is the country people come to and create new, better lives for themselves. Even my long time dream of becoming a police officer like my father or my childish idea of being a scientist that will cure cancer faded. I started to get interested in technology and astronomy. I kept getting more and more interested in science, putting most of my focus into science and figuring out what career I may want. Being in America I thought “there are a lot of jobs here so I have a lot of options”. I thought that by the time I finish high school everything should be easier and welcoming to me. This mindset propelled me through middle school. There were a few times where I wanted to change schools though. I went from getting insults about my accent to insults about my height, there was no way

to get away from hearing negative things people say. At this point of sixth grade though, going back to Jamaica didn't really cross my mind as much. Sure there were times I missed my room and all of my toys, but I started to like my new lifestyle.

Seventh and eighth grade held the best years of my middle school life. I participated in science fairs, went on a lot of trips, had a lot of fun with my friends and started to enjoy gaming a lot more. I initially started gaming during sixth grade but not that much. I can remember the times when my close friends came over to my house to hangout. I became so accustomed to the American lifestyle that I completely forgot that I wasn't from here, I even lost my accent. Even though I was living in America for about four years at this point, I was still in the dark about the truth of being an immigrant in America. I have heard the word used to describe multiple people in my middle school and the community that I live in, but I didn't truly know the ramifications.

It was finally time for me to move onto my next chapter in life, Highschool. I originally had a plan for the next four years, knowing what my major will be during college and my job field that I want. Even up until this point, I was convinced that America was the land of opportunity and I have to take advantage of it. I was advised to start looking into colleges early, with a brief introduction to scholarships and the different pathways I can take even right after highschool. I was told that I could go to college, earn my degree and get a job with a tech company. I could even join the military because they had the job I wanted. At this point I was overwhelmed with how many different routes I could take, making me even more positive about my future. Fast forward to just after the pandemic, when it was getting closer and closer to college applications along with scholarship/grant applications. My stress was building and I still didn't know everything about being an immigrant and what that truly meant for me. I had a plan

to apply for a military scholarship for college and then commission into the air force or army after I graduate.

There I was with the tab open, applications just opened that day. I try to apply, and the happiness and excitement I felt faded. Everything came crashing down.

I wasn't able to apply because I was not a citizen. I felt as if my whole entire world view and life plan was shattered on the spot, but I continued to look into other ways I may be able to get what I want. Time after time, the same thing kept coming up, "I'm not a citizen". I kept getting discouraged and started to think, "what was the point of coming here for a better life if I am in a worse position than I would have been if I stayed in Jamaica?".

The constant reminders that I was not a citizen and denial from some of my dreams discouraged me a lot. I was once very determined to join the military, like I saw no other route I wanted to take. However, due to my ambition being degraded, I no longer had the drive to join the military and serve this country.

I kept my hopes up, talked to my college advisors and guidance counselor on ways to still get financial aid and apply to a "cheaper" college. It seemed that every time I found a way out, I hit another roadblock that stemmed from the same issue, not being a citizen.

I remember at one point when I was completing my CUNY application I didn't feel very motivated. It felt like my hard work ever since 7th grade was for nothing, just because I was born in a different country. A part of the reason I was able to keep going though was because I had two friends in a very similar position. They came from a different country and were also finding it hard to get aid and colleges that would accept them. We would often talk about it together and encourage ourselves not to give up.

My confusion turned into anger and was mixed together with sadness about the truth of my immigrant situation. "I should have never come here". These thoughts constantly went through my mind as I continued through my senior year of highschool. I got many of my college responses back during this time, and one after another, "we regret to inform you" for a majority of my applications, even for scholarships. This opened my eyes to the fact that America isn't what they advertise. It is a lot harder for immigrants and people of color. It also didn't help that it felt like my father wasn't trying to fix the situation I was in. At the point where I got my response back from the CUNY application I realized that I was going to be on my own. I wasn't a "kid" anymore and my future will be what I make of it. I didn't expect to really get accepted after I was denied left and right from colleges and scholarships, but to my surprise, I was accepted.

My hope came back and I decided to commit to city college, believing that The City College of New York would give me a better chance. City college has a lower tuition cost than other colleges, but when you're a non citizen/ out of state resident, you are charged at least twice as much compared to the tuition rates for citizens. It is still very hard on my ambition because I am not a citizen nor does city college recognize me as an instate resident. Even so I will not let this stop me from my goal, and though I no longer believe that America is the land of opportunity for all, a place where immigrants achieve better lives than they had in their home country, I still will try to make the best out of my situation.

That being said, I have started to prove that my new belief is right and more grounded in reality. I was previously not seen as an instate resident, however there was a way for me to apply to be seen as one with proof. My application was denied multiple times for missing or expired items so often that I was close to giving up.

Looking back on my journey so far, I am very grateful for the people that kept encouraging me and pushing me. If I had given up I wouldn't know that the main thing that pays off in America is hard work, especially for the not privileged immigrants who had complicated situations. I'm not sure if my life would have been better if I stayed in Jamaica or not. I do have two half sisters that still live in Jamaica and went to university there. Schooling in Jamaica is a lot stricter and more pricey up until American college. Comparing my experiences with theirs, I start to accept that I was placed in a different situation.