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Walking into the office…. “The first client that I had was here in Richmond, CA and it was a genetic disease screening program and we were helping them analyze blood specimens of newborns and pregnant women and based upon certain values and thresholds can predict the outcome of the pregnancy. The core software provides analysis and notifications.”

***Tell me about your high school years, where you grew up and what motivated you to come to the United States.***

I grew up in Belarus, a former Soviet Union country and moved here when I was 21 years old. I was already studying back home for three years. One day I had this opportunity to come to the U.S. to work and travel for 6 months (2008). While I was here, I thought I should stay longer and truly use the opportunity to grow and go to school and try getting a good job and good growth.

The way I stayed in the United States was based upon political asylum. I had to prove that it was dangerous for me to go back home. I was an activist and against the current government regime and supporting opposition forces and until today the president is still the same and he has been the president since 1991 and the country is a dictatorship regime and it is common for people from my country to come on asylum. I do like to share that story to open people’s eyes – and those who have no idea that the problem exists. I do get appreciation from people who tell the story.

I find telling the story a benefit – and I don’t mind telling it to people. It is beneficial. Most of my peers know that and have more admiration for me because I went through that.

For about a year, after arriving in 2008, I came with $300 and had to support myself. I worked for a year. I arrived in North Carolina for the first three months of my U.S. life and then moved to California. I started at CCSF in 2009 while working – and where I met you and how it all started. I worked, grew professionally and personally.

***How did you choose CCSF?***

When I moved to San Francisco, I had a friend here and I knew a few people from Belarus where I used to live on Treasure Island there was a community. They would give advice about best options to stay in the Bay Area. I didn’t have an option for college – some people went to SFSU or Berkeley, but for community college – since everyone I knew went through community college, it was kind of a no-brainer.

**You arrive at CCSF. How did you decide upon classes? Who helped you?**

I think I started taking classes at CCSF (ESL) while I didn’t have papers for six months, and I didn’t speak English that well. For some reason, it didn’t require proof of your legal status, so I could start attending those classes. I remember being the only Russian-speaking person in the room and the others were Spanish. It was night school and most were workers in low-paid jobs who were there to learn English.

Almost from the beginning, I knew people who went to Berkeley and almost from the year 1, I set my goal that I wanted to do that as well. It was helpful to know someone who could give me the best advices what needs to be done. I kind of already had all of this career planning. It wasn’t take this class and take that class, but more of a general approach. I think I saw a counselor, but my peers were the best counselors for me. Since I didn’t know anything about the educational system in America – I never had a counselor back home, so it was alien to go to a person and ask for advice. So, I would just talk to my peers and learn that way.

***How would you describe your City College experience if someone were to ask you?***

I think City College was – it’s a great platform for people with different backgrounds for people who came from outside and can’t go straight to university – they have to have some kind of education – I think City College is a great place to go. I don’t know what other kind of stories – if you grew up in American and finished high school and weren’t able to get in, this is still a great way to keep your education at a high level and have an opportunity to transfer. I know it is harder, but it is definitely possible. Most of my peers were planning on transferring went to the university and were able to do that. It’s hard work, plan ahead, and do everything possible, plan ahead, and do everything that depends on you – and you will be able to get anywhere you want.

City College gives you everything you need to succeed – it’s just a matter of you taking it and using the opportunity for you to leverage it.

***What was your most memorable part of City College?***

I really like their swimming pool, actually. Their brand new facility that they built. I would go swimming and go there twice a week. I love that place. I think about it sometimes. I didn’t have a chance to go there after leaving City College, but it is definitely one of the best pools that I have seen in the Bay Area.

***What were some of the extracurricular activities that you participated in? How did they provide value to you?***

Yeah, so there were a few clubs that I was a part of. Undergraduate Investment Group was one – it’s been awhile – four or five years now. Great speakers from industry to inspire students to share their story about their career, prospects and give us advice – I think that was useful as well. Started my own startup club where we would get people together to share ideas or new things that people discovered approached to starting their own business – not a particular industry, but generally innovative ideas for business.

You’re at CCSF for three years – On24 is where I worked during my last year at CCSF and the first years I was a security guard and then worked at a restaurant. You can read at work (security guard), so that was helpful.

***What was the most memorable thing at CCSF with regard to the instructors or instruction?***

I definitely think that without you Susan, I wouldn’t be able to get anywhere since you were able to connect us with a lot of our people to get internships or to get advice to connect us with students also. So, I think that was probably kind of the main factor of why I was able to get into UC Berkeley. I didn’t apply to any other schools because I didn’t want to leave the Bay Area. I realize that it was a risk not to apply to anywhere else, but I did the best with what I could. If I didn’t get in, I would have figured something out later, but that has kind of been my strategy in life – work as hard as you can, don’t focus your attention on other things and don’t ask yourself too much “what if” because all of those doubts will not help you in the future. If the problem comes, sure, you can solve it. Sure – you can try to predict the problem – but it hasn’t been helpful to me that way. You can be stupid sometimes – if you see that you have a good chance of achieving something, just go there.

***What would you say about the two year experience at Berkeley vs. CCSF?***

Definitely very different and much more competitive – it has a lot to do with being at Haas and not being an econ major. Haas is much more competitive than any other major at UC Berkeley. Overall, I didn’t quite try to play the same game of compete with each other and not care about personal relationship, because a lot of people can forget that personal relationship is more important than performing better than the rest. I was doing my own thing. I was doing my best at school, but if I couldn’t get an A, I didn’t care that much. I truly would care about meeting interesting people, making friends and getting knowledge. Overall, I really enjoyed the UCB experience. There are so many other classes you can take on top of your core classes at Haas. The business classes aren’t that exciting or interesting – I have actually noticed that classes like accounting or finance are not that much harder than the ones at City College. The cases may have been more up to date or interesting, but the knowledge used for those cases was almost identical. Berkeley wasn’t much harder, but it was harder to get a good grade. They graded on the curve, and it would get very ridiculous. Once on a test – accounting – I got 13/15 and got a B-, but there are so many people with a perfect score. I don’t think that’s exactly fair, or the right approach to grade students. You still have to separate the top, top students from the rest. Maybe instead of implementing.. lower performing even though it is high performing students. With the curve, it is going to be challenging to get a good grade.

***How can we improve at CCSF? What things were bothersome?***

 I don’t remember anything that bothered me. I was just doing my thing and I don’t think I was complaining at any point. It’s hard for me to find something that didn’t work for me because everything kind of worked. I knew what was expected, I would do my best, and usually get an expected result out of it. So, I don’t know something that didn’t work for me, perse. English was hard – 1A,B,C. It wasn’t a CCSF problem, but more my own skill problem. I was able to pass the class and it was tougher for me. I’m not the best writer, so that didn’t help. I do remember now. Sometimes it is harder to enroll in the required classes – sometimes they were just more challenging – it was harder to select the better professor who was either easier or more interesting.

***What were the three best things about CCSF?***

Financial aid was great, and I didn’t have to pretty much pay for my tuitions. CCSF gives all classes that you need to take in order to transfer to schools Berkeley. I realize that not all community college provide needed or prerequisite classes. I didn’t really have that problem. One summer I remember that CCSF was closed, and I didn’t want to lose any units to transfer, so I took English at Laney. It was much easier to pass that English and that worked out for me. Other than that, all of the classes that I needed I was able to get. I will say that sometimes it hard to enroll in classes because everyone is trying to take the same classes that are more popular and core classes required for higher education. Some of those classes were a little more challenging.

***2008 you arrive. Fast forward to July 20, 2016. When you look at yourself today and try to look at yourself today, what shaped you?***

I think what really shaped me as a person was tough moments at the beginning where I had to struggle a little in terms of supporting myself and not having anyone to be there – and I was able to figure that out. Find a way to support myself, at the same time, have fun and meet people. The best thing in my personality is openness, curiosity and friendliness. There were so many times where I would get help, support or advice from people where I didn’t expect to get help from. It usually comes from me just being friendly to everyone and don’t really judge. Curiosity is another thing – just by being curious lets me learn about interesting facts, interesting people, interesting place – and then having that interesting knowledge – a feedback loop attracts other people. Then when I meet other people, they say, “you should meet that person – you would really love, because he is just like you – very curious about things – and I love it.

***If you had not been part of the community of folks that you knew from back home that it would have been more difficult?***

I still stay in touch with folks at CCSF. I do stay in touch with some of the real good friends from UC Berkeley as well. All of my friends that I was surrounded by at UC Berkeley were transfer student. With that community, it would be much, much harder and I don’t know if I would even apply to UC Berkeley – being an outsider and I don’t know. It would be much harder and I would have much more mental blocks inside of me and it would be harder to achieve everything and get all the steps in? Did City College give you a lot more confidence? I think just by deciding to come alone to the United States early, and even that information in my head would give me much more confidence that I am much more comfortable and I don’t have to rely on anyone. Any person with a lot of confidence – the difference is that a piece of information that a confidence has inside is just a memory or some information stored in your head that makes you feel that confident. Why can’t we just imagine we have the information in our heads to truly believe it to make us become more confident? I always think about it – two people with same body parts and one is more confident and the other is not.

***How did you land this job at Deloitte and why do you think you got picked?***

I did apply for an internship, and again, my kind of community helped me learn that once you get into Berkeley, you have to start looking for a job right away. And it’s so much harder for you to be a transfer student because kids that have been there already for two years when you get there – a lot of them already had internships and you’re competing with kids from Berkeley who already had internships. I didn’t get an internship at Deloitte and also applied to the same program, but I did introduce myself to a lot of people who were doing the recruiting and it will be the same people next year, and I think I left a good impression. It’s harder to get an internship because they are taking much less people for it. Much fewer spots, and it is more competitive. For full time, it is slightly less competitive. What helped me, I think, was some of my experience doing IT work and technology consulting, so I already had some relevant experience. If you just take all these students, you would say UC Berkeley degree is a competitive advantage, but they all have that, so I wouldn’t just mention having a degree from UC Berkeley. But more so, just experience working On24 (previous job), and I definitely studied for the interview a lot. There is a certain kind of way consultant interviews go. There’s a case study and they ask you a specific way of approaching a problem. You can’t just be super smart. You have to know the framework for it and they ask questions and just go and do the interview perfectly. They are looking for a certain way of thinking. And you know, when I was prepping for an internship and I really didn’t study enough. I just wasn’t as ready as other kids. So, for fulltime, I made sure that I was ready and I studied much more and prepared myself better. Yeah.

***Where do you see yourself in the next decade? Any thoughts?***

Yeah, after working for about two years after school in the corporate world, I am getting slightly kind of, I won’t say tired, but realizing more and more that I need something maybe where I have more responsibility working towards my personal goal instead of me being a very small piece of…. Like a screw in the big machine…. I’d actually like to drive the innovation or drive whatever I am working on or working on my passion. So, most likely, it is my big hope that I will start something soon. Something that I am passionate about and something that I would consider not working for it, it would be like my dream job doing my hobby 24/7. I think I want to stay in the Bay Area. Have you met Monica? My fiancé and future wife? She is originally from, she was born in Peru and she grew up in Florida, and she still thinks it is a little too cold for her, and she wants tropical warm ocean where she can swim. I don’t blame her. I do like that type of environment where it is warm and you can swim. But I do like the Bay Area, I have a lot of friends here and it is beautiful. I like the nature. We live in Lake Merritt now. So, yeah, we will see. Ideally, I could live a few places throughout the year – six months here, six months somewhere else. That kind of scenario.