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Tell me about your high school years and the educational system from which you came

The education system in Russia is very very different and everybody is expected to go to college. It’s not a question of whether you’re going or not. College and university are one and the same. Career ambitions are not really promoted (for women). My mom encouraged me to do what I like to do. She never pushed me and the studies that I didn’t grasp right away – she would say to focus on what I am good at. Now as an adult, I see advantages and disadvantages of that approach. I know if I would have studied a little bit more, I would have gotten it right away. Nobody pushed me and I couldn’t care less. I was always ambitious and I liked doing what I found myself successful in. I just never cared for sciences for math, and I so wish I’d have paid more attention to it. I thought I would start my own business and I was very much into travel and I loved languages – I was good with languages. And back then, travel agencies were on the rise and nobody knew much about Expedia or self-service platforms. I was going to open a travel agency and I went to the International Academy for Tourism and my specialty there was Travel and Restaurant Business under the umbrella of hospitality and I did three years of college – after my second year I did a study abroad program – and that was my first time in the U.S. My aunt had been living in the U.S. for 16-18 years now and so my mom said that it was my first time traveling to the U.S. that I should go back to see her so that my mom would not worry as much. She lived in Missouri and it was an interesting experience and for the first time the America that I got to see was the America that most people live in. I didn’t like that because everything that I saw about America was from the movies and they don’t really show a lot about America from Missouri. I worked for three months doing bookkeeping at a store similar to Home Depot in a tiny town called Aurora near Springfield. They live on a huge farm and it was a completely different experience. After my three months of work, I saved money to use for travel. I came to San Francisco for a day in 2007 (September). While I couldn’t understand what it was all about in just one day, I guess I can’t say I really loved it.

I had to go back and finish my education and traveled back in September of 2008. The city I chose was San Francisco. Three months before I came, I was doing my research about where to stay, how to find a job. I went on Skype, which was just coming out in Russia at the beginning of 2008 and I did a search on Skype of people who lived in San Francisco but spoke Russian and Skype gave me a list. There was an account right in the middle and I called that account. The account user hung up on me and I didn’t even know whether it was a male or female (in English). I said that I was just this girl from Russia looking for advice and we talked a bit more (and more) and exchanged pictures and now this person is my husband. (chuckles). I asked him about his story and how he came to the U.S. and we just sort of developed this online friendship.

How I got to City College:

The person I met on Skype randomly and when I asked him about school and the summer that I met him in person was the summer that he had just gotten in Haas. I heard about Berkeley back in Russia. We only know Stanford, Berkeley and Harvard and that was huge but I didn’t know about any majors at Berkeley and I had no idea how big a deal that was. He basically told me the entire path that he was poor, he had to work, he had no support from his family, he had to work two jobs sometimes and that City College was the only way he could continue his studies and that there was a way to transfer to a four-year school after that and that is how it began.

You arrive at CCSF. Where did you begin?

I knew how and where to take the placement test. I did that and one of the requirements going further was seeing a counselor and then I found it not extremely helpful and going forward, what helped me most was networking. Just talking to students and seeing what people were going through. You meet in classes but you all have different majors in mind and different four year universities that you want to transfer to. Some people are not going to transfer and experiences are very very different and its very eye opening because studying at a place with people from such diverse backgrounds was very valuable experience. You see different perspectives and you see that you’re not in a bubble that people come from different places and that they want different things. You see some students not having a clue about what they’re doing. They’re being told to go to college sometimes by parents and some people join community college at a later time when they have a better understanding or vision about where they’re going and they have a plan. Gathering that information from everybody and making sense about what could work for you and then reaching out and just asking for advice and help. I found out about assist.org and I cannot remember where I found out about it from, but that site was essential for me to determine which classes to take, which prerequisites I needed to complete for which university. I was pretty much only interested in UC Berkeley and my very wise professor suggested that I not put all my eggs in one basket but I did apply to UC Davis.

What is your greatest memory of CCSF?

I have many, but the first that came to mind was that I was part of the Undergraduate Investment Group at City College. That group was formed by a couple of great students, one of whom was my good friend and roommate at the time. I saw them putting the group together from scratch and I saw them excel so I became interested in joining the group and really knowing how to run a club, how to attract people, run events and that activity aligned with what I was going to do professionally in the future (marketing) and even though I was not per se into investments or finance, I got engaged and found an angle and went through the interviews and as the staff of the group, we were hosting an event. We invited Ted Janus. Even though we planned so rigorously, so many things went wrong. The only thing he wanted was coffee, so by the time he gets to his speaker event, he gets coffee. We were just learning how to get things on time, where to get them from, and how to get them for cheap. The coffee we got was from the cafeteria at City College. We wanted to source everything from City College and we thought that going forward we could see (building the network at City College) and they were late with their coffee and someone ran and bought the cup of coffee from somewhere else. But just that experience of keeping in mind that things go wrong and that you always need a backup plan and not to panic and that we are all human and that people understand regardless of how big or important they are. Also, from that event, most people who came wearing pretty much pajamas or what City College students wear to class. I don’t believe we had a dress code on the invite and it was interesting how Ted the speaker – he said it – when someone asked about advice you could give in your professional life and one thing he said that was important was to dress the part and well, he pointed it out that this is a professional event and that nobody is dressed professionally.

What could CCSF do better?

It has everything to do with resources. Updating the rooms, the equipment, access to computers. I want to say that I went back a few times after I graduated and I see new building, at least one. I don’t know how it is in other buildings, but some of the parts of the campus are really really outdated. Another thing I want to point out is that maybe access potential students get to being students – I feel like a lot of them abuse the system and there are so many ambitious and goal oriented people who would benefit from studying and people who are the first to go to college in their families and people who don’t have money to go to college or people who went on the wrong path or decided to take time off for some reason and then they decide to come back and then they know what they want. But there are a lot of people who are staying random places just to stay on financial aid, people who distract other students in class, people who are consistently late or who bring loud music or dogs to school and people who are just hanging out there and are not there for a reason. I might be wrong, because I think everyone deserves a chance or a second chance – not sure about the third, but the second… and maybe throughout the time a person who was hanging out there for no reason meets somebody and discovers that path, but I feel like the process of letting students in can be revised.

Navigating the U.S. educational system

Starting at CCSF was my first educational facility in the states. I had never studied in the states and I had nothing to compare it to and the only other educational system I could compare was the one in Russia and it was very very different and I could go on Rate My Professors and find the easiest or most interesting and that I could try them out, see if the time worked for me and see the syllabus that first day to see if it worked with my schedule, and I have never gone to middle school or high school here, but the syllabus – that piece of paper that clearly states what the expectations are – I thought that was brilliant. It was very clear cut, everybody knew exactly what they need to succeed. No excuses. People get sick or they have to travel, but you can always work with your professor on an individual basis to work on an extra credit and see if you could improve your grade. In my experience, all instructors were open and they offered extra credit and if they saw you excelling, some of them would offer or were open to giving you extra work or extra credit for reaching out – or internships or research opportunities and it was great that it was not just limited to what the class has to offer and you didn’t have to stay with just the same level because people come with different goals and even if the majority is on a different track than yours, you can still squeeze the most out of your experience.

How did you build community at CCSF?

I spoke with a lot of Russian people (laughs). Just staying in touch with the Russian community and in any cultural community, you know one person and then you know the rest of them. A lot of the immigrants my age and a lot of the immigrants that came, either my generation or the generation before me – children who grew up here and spoke Russian fluently, we all had a lot in common and we stuck together and exchanged information about teachers and the classes and things like that. That was the first stepping stone in building that community because people know people and you go to events and if a Russian friend invites you to an event and you get to meet that circle that is not entirely Russian, and that goes on.