

In the U.S., You Have to Rely on Yourself

Zula Sabatino



"In Mongolia, I always had help from my extended family. We all helped each other."

BEFORE YOU READ: In your home country, did you rely on your community? What about here in the U.S.? Whom do you rely on?

Surprise! I Won the Lottery

I was born and raised in Ulaanbaatar, the capital city of Mongolia. I had a great life in Mongolia. I had three sisters and a brother, and our family was very close. I was very sociable. I had a lot of friends from high school, university, and work. Before starting my career, I got my bachelor's degree in business. Then I got a job at the National Office of Statistics. I never thought about leaving my country to live abroad.

One day, my sister told me about the U.S. Green Card Lottery. She offered to help me apply. We didn't really know what to expect, but it sounded like too good an opportunity to miss. I didn't have any concrete plans. And guess what? I won the lottery and got a Green Card on my first



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try. So in 2007, when I was 27 years old, I moved to the United States, and I have been here ever since.

Starting Over in the U.S.

When I came to the U.S., I never thought about what it would be like to start everything over again all by myself. I imagined that my life would be just like what I had seen in American movies: a big house; a nice car; a beautiful, rich life. But it wasn't such *a bed of roses!* To begin with, I spent 60 hours in transit to get here, and I arrived with \$700 in my pocket, thinking it would be enough for everything.

The first two years in this country were especially hard. When I arrived, I came straight to Portsmouth, New Hampshire, and I got a job as a housekeeper at a hotel. In Mongolia, I would never have dreamed of earning my living by cleaning, but this was the only job I could find. The job was

hard and paid very little. At first, I was very happy to have it, but then I began to face a lot of new problems. My coworkers, American teens and young adults, treated me in a very disrespectful and patronizing way. They gave me orders all the time. They took advantage of me and pressured me to do work they didn't want to do. They made *feel like a loser*, and I didn't have the courage or the language to defend myself. Now I see that this was racist harassment.

I also made very little money, working extremely long hours for just enough to *scrape by*. Room service tips were one of my most important sources of income. I needed those tips for basic expenses like food and gas. With little English, I struggled to communicate with everyone at work, at home, and anywhere else I went.

My managers were great, though, and helped me to understand how to do many things. They gave me a lot of hope and inspiration. I had a dream, and I thought if I just try a little harder, I can make it come true.

The Job Became a Nightmare

But soon the hotel was sold to another company, and the new management was terrible. They cut our base salary and a lot of benefits from our compensation package. My old income wasn't enough to provide for me, and now I was even worse off! I had to work harder for even less money. I



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Go to <https://www.google.com/maps> and search for Mongolia. Move the cursor around to rotate the globe and explore where Mongolia is in relation to other countries.

also had the feeling that the new housekeeping manager was stealing our tips from the rooms. I complained, but nothing changed. The job became a nightmare, but I was too afraid of losing my job and income to say anything else. I thought I might be fired and become homeless. I stayed much too long in that situation.

Now, I realize how naive and frightened I was. I had to learn the hard way not to let myself be *treated like dirt*. Eventually, I quit housekeeping and became a waitress.

Now I Am Stronger

Looking back, I see now that I learned something important about the United States from this experience. In this country, you have to rely on yourself all the time. In Mongolia, I always had help from my extended family. We all helped each other. But when I came to the United States, my old life didn't come with me. Now I know, after all my hard work, that I am much stronger than I ever thought, and I have a lot of opportunities ahead of me. I have more confidence in myself.

AFTER YOU READ:

1. Look at the phrases in bold italics and discuss their meaning.
2. How is it different for workers who have a union at work? Share what you know about unions. Read about hotel workers in Boston on p. 49 of [Issue #36](#) of *The Change Agent*.