

WHEN CULTURES COLLIDE

Sanvi Prasad bridges cultural differences between her German, American and Indian upbringings

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It's holiday season at Sanvi Prasad's (11) house. Christmas songs and the scent of Indian spices cloud the air. Snatches of conversation in German, Hindi and English float around the kitchen. In the living room, a decorated tree glows with colorful lights. The mashup of traditions may seem confusing, but to Sanvi and her family, it couldn't feel more natural.

Sanvi's house is a reflection of her — the Berlin girl who grew up singing German carols and polishing her boots for Nikolaustag each December; the Hindu daughter who wears colorful saris and celebrates Indian festivals; the American teenager who watches high school football games and dances at Homecoming. It's a cultural blend that has shaped her life from the moment she packed her bags and stepped on the plane, heading for St. Louis.

Journey to the United States

Sanvi moved to the United States in October 2022, after her dad got a new job there. After spending 14 years of her life in Germany, the change was stunning.

"When my mom first told me, I was in complete shock, because I'd never even thought of moving anywhere; my whole childhood was spent in Berlin," Sanvi said. "My mom just sat me down, and she told me about how we're moving in a few months. I had to deal with the fact that my whole life will be turned upside down, and all the plans that I've had will be gone and I have to start from scratch."

To prepare for the move, the Prasad family sold their house and temporarily moved into an apartment, shipping all their furniture and luggage to the U.S. ahead of time. Sanvi spent time with friends and family and collected souvenirs that she would miss, but despite months of preparation, the feeling of her life being uprooted would stay with her even as she boarded the plane.

"I was so nervous, because I'd never been to the U.S., and now I was going to live there permanently," Sanvi said. "When we were flying, it felt surreal. I was like, is this really happening?"

Soumya Prasad (9), Sanvi's sister, shared the feeling. During the move, Soumya depended on Sanvi for support. Now, as a high school student, Soumya is able to recognize the full burden that her older sister was carrying.

"Now I'm in ninth grade, and she was in ninth grade when she first came," Soumya said. "She went through this too. It must have been so scary for her, [but] I don't think she ever showed that she was struggling to me."

Though Sanvi put on a brave face, she initially found it tough to settle into life in the U.S, especially because of the drastic differences in culture between the two countries.

"In the beginning, I really used to miss [Germany]," Sanvi said. "I felt homesick for at least the first five months. It was really hard because of not having any friends or just anything familiar. Everything was so foreign to me here."

Not everything about moving to the U.S. was negative. From what Sanvi had imagined in Germany and seen online, the thought of going to an American high school and living in a city so different from Berlin was thrilling.

"There's always this thing anywhere outside of the U.S. where people think of it as a dream," Sanvi said. "The high schools having games that people go to, being part of the sports team, school dances and everything, even lockers. I was always hoping to have my own locker, just because I saw it in movies. You get a picture in your mind from what the media portrays. In some ways it was like my expectations, but some of the stereotypes weren't as true."

In Berlin, Sanvi attended a bilingual school that taught English and German, allowing her to become fluent in both. However, being immersed in an English-dominant environment like the U.S. was completely different from what she was used to and she had to quickly adjust.

"I'd never spoken English at home before or anywhere outside of school," Sanvi said. "I now speak it virtually all the time. That was a big change in the beginning. Sometimes it got confusing, but now, English is almost automatic. If somebody woke me up in the middle of the night and asked me something, I might just reply in English."

Today, Sanvi speaks English, Hindi and German. It's an accomplishment made possible by her affinity for languages and the dedication she had to master them.

"[Sanvi has] liked learning languages ever since we were young," Soumya said. "She has always been able to communicate her feelings with emotions. That helped her in the move, because she was trying to figure out her own feelings, and she [used] English as a method to convey them. She was able to speak it so well."

However, living in the U.S. and speaking English for the majority of her daily life has made it harder for Sanvi to preserve her fluency and accent in German.

"Of course, we try to speak German as much as possible, but living in an environment with a different language makes it really hard to maintain," Sanvi said. "English has become much more significant now."

Eventually, Sanvi learned how to reconcile the contrasts of German and American cultures and adapt accordingly.

"When you realize these differences, you have to adapt," Sanvi said. "You can't just stick to what you have because that worked for the place you were in. It might not work where you are right now."

A Cultural Blend

Having ties to so many different places and cultures is bound to leave its mark. With her German, Indian and American background to reckon with, Sanvi has had to navigate many personal and cultural challenges.

"One of them is having a clear picture for yourself of who you are," Sanvi said. "It gets really confusing at times



because you're like a blend of all the cultures you've experienced, all the people you've met. There's parts of me that resonate with every culture that I've been in contact with."

Sanvi has also strengthened her ties to her Indian heritage by speaking Hindi, eating Indian food and observing the religion — traditions she's followed for years.

"We celebrate Indian festivals [and] I dress up, listen to Indian music," Sanvi said. "My parents try to keep me informed of all the festivals and some of the meanings. We try to maintain as much as possible."

For the Prasad family, blending all the traditions and cultures they have is their way of finding common ground.

"We celebrate holidays from all parts of all cultures; we just blend the traditions that they might have," Sanvi said. "There are little things that we do. For example, just speaking in all three languages is unique to our family. Hearing conversations that we have might be very confusing to anyone who speaks German, or only English or only Hindi, because we blend all three languages as a way to maintain all three cultures."

But despite Sanvi's attempts to maintain her connection to Germany and India, she often worries about losing touch with her culture.

"The question I always struggle with is if people ask me, 'Where are you from?'" Sanvi said. "There's so many different answers I could give them, depending on if they're asking me where I was born or where I lived, or where I spent my childhood, or what my nationality is, or my ethnicity is or where I'm living right now. All of these questions have different answers."

To Sanvi and Soumya, their culture is multifaceted, with their German, Indian, and American culture all playing a role. It's their own way of acknowledging all the different places in the world that hold significance for them, and impacted their lives.

"I see myself as a blend of all three [cultures], and that can be confusing for people to understand," Sanvi said. "Despite me not knowing how to pronounce every single word perfectly in Hindi, or not speaking as much German as I used to, I don't think it's appropriate to just label me as one. All three make up me as a person."

Putting Down Roots

When she moved to St. Louis, Sanvi was navigating the challenges of a different country and beginning high school. Now, with two years separating her from her life in Germany, she is able to reflect on her journey.

"There's definitely been challenges," Sanvi said. "It makes me ask, 'Am I the same person I was when I moved here? What would my past self think of me now?' Because of course, I've had to adapt. But overall, I don't think gain-

ing knowledge or new experiences is ever bad. It helps shape you into a better person."

Sanvi's struggle hasn't gone unnoticed. For Soumya, her older sister's resilience and adaptability was a source of inspiration that she used to tackle her own challenges.

"She's my role model," Soumya said. "A lot of things she's gone through, I adapted to my life too, and not just because we moved to the U.S. I've been doing that since I was younger."

Social studies teacher Meg Kaupp, who taught Sanvi in ninth grade, has also been a witness to her journey. Kaupp speaks German fluently after living and studying in the country, even seeing the Berlin Wall fall. She quickly connected with Sanvi over their shared love of Germany.

"As she made connections and friends and figured out how the American high school system works, she very quickly settled in," Kaupp said. "It was wonderful to be able to talk to someone who had an appreciation and a love for a place that means a lot to me."

To those that knew her the best, it was clear how living in the U.S. had changed Sanvi, not just in the language or the place, but in her personality.

"In Germany, she was more introverted," Soumya said. "I thought that was just her personality, but when we came to the U.S., I think she became more comfortable with the people here and with her friends too. Anytime I see that going on, I get this really proud feeling."

It hasn't been easy, but Sanvi has begun to settle into her new life and location.

"I slowly started to branch out in school a little more," Sanvi said. "I joined a few clubs. I joined the water polo team and

made a few friends, and that's when it started getting better. And now with two years of living here, I still miss [Germany], of course, but I've settled in pretty well."

As she's gotten used to the unfamiliarity of the U.S., Sanvi was able to see the positives in moving and how her multicultural experience had impacted her life.

"I personally think it's a great thing to have such a wide perspective," Sanvi said. "That's what my parents always tell me when I feel homesick. What a wonderful opportunity I had to gather these different perspectives from all over the country and all over the world. All those experiences that I've had, with my family in India, or in Germany, now in the U.S., have helped me shape my perspective."

Captions: Sanvi Prasad (11) shows pictures of her family and souvenirs from Germany and India in her home. They were collected on her trips to Europe as keepsakes to help her preserve her many cultures. "I went back to Germany and saw the places that used to be my everyday life," Sanvi said. "That gave me closure, that visit to Berlin. Photos by Vincent Hsiao. (on pages 62-65) 📷

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Sanvi Prasad (11)

