

My American Year

This past year has simply been unforgettable. On the plane to the U.S., more than a year ago, I remember thinking about how my life in Charleston would have been. I did not really know what to expect, I just knew I would have had a lot of fun, improved my English and eaten junk food pretty much every day. I did not have any idea on how life changing this experience would have been. Thanks to the year I spent in Charleston, I have changed in so many ways I can hardly tell.

When I was chosen and told I was going to live in Charleston, South Carolina, I was kind of let down because my goal was to go to California or Illinois. But as soon as I got there I changed my mind: I discovered that Charleston is a lovely, historical and florid city, whose beautiful Southern houses are surrounded by rivers and wonderful forests. Studying U.S. History I discovered that the first shots of the Civil War were shot there and that South Carolina has been the first state to secede from the United States of America. After a couple of months I fell in love with Charleston and every time I had the possibility I would walk around downtown with my friends.



Firstly, I want to tell you about my host family. I was hosted by a Jewish family: Stuart, Nanci and my little host brother, Jacob Kestembaum. When I first met them I was shocked by how different our customs and habits were. I have to say, at first I had quite a hard time getting used to my new family, especially to the food they ate. In fact, as all Orthodox Jews, they kept Kosher at home and observed all the Jewish holidays and rituals. Kosher is a group of rules that concerns food. For example, according to it, you cannot mix meat and dairy products in the same meal; this means they have two different fridges, two sets of silverware and even two different sponges to clean the plates. Also, not every kind of meat is allowed: pork and seafood are forbidden and, furthermore, meat has to be butchered in a specific way in order to be Kosher, which makes it particularly expensive. Because of all these rules, their cuisine was almost completely vegetarian. To me, since I always thought American food was characterized by barbecue and burgers, eating vegetarian was completely unexpected! But, besides the food problem, which I got used to, the Kestembaums were great: Jacob is the sweetest kid ever, everyday he would come to me to tell me how his day had been and to ask me if I wanted to do something. One of the things I am more grateful of is that they were Jewish: the fact that they were of a different religion helped me broaden my horizon; it has been really interesting to learn all their customs and to experience a completely different culture.



Now let's move on and talk about school. In Charleston I attended West Ashley High School, a huge school located in the suburbs of the city.

It is here that I noticed the biggest differences between America and Italy: in the U.S. school is the place where teenagers spend most of their lives, not just to study, but also to play sports, meet up with friends and cultivate their own hobbies and interests. Furthermore, there is a strong feeling of belonging to the school, everyone goes to the events in which a school club is participating to support the school and to cheer their schoolmates. In addition, instead of choosing a specialized high school like you do in Italy, in America public high schools are all the same and students are able to choose the classes they want to follow, which makes it easier for them to choose what they want to do after high school. The school year is divided into two semesters, the students have to take four classes per semester and the schedule is the same throughout the entire semester. The classes I decided to take were U.S. History, AP Calculus (a year-long class), Intro to Engineering Design and Pre-Calculus Honors for the first semester; Culinary Arts, English 3 Honors, AP Calculus BC and AP Government and Macroeconomics for the second semester. In American high schools the same classes can have different levels: there is the basic level, then the Honors level and then, for some of the senior classes there is the AP (Advanced Placement) level. AP level is the hardest and at the end of the class students have to take a final exam that is the same for the whole nation: this exam is graded from one to five and if you get at least a three you pass and it counts as a college credit. I loved high school there because the work, especially in the first semester, was not much and I found great people that helped me fit in.

In America, they are very serious about sports. I signed up for cross country on the first day and got immediately absorbed by it: we trained from Monday to Thursday after school for two hours and we had meets almost every week. Practice was always very hard and everyday for the first four months I got home completely worn out. Even though it was a lot of work I am glad I signed up because my teammates were great and we had a lot of fun. Having the opportunity to experience a different type of education has helped me choose what I am going to do after graduating from high school. I chose to take classes on economics and engineering in order to get a flavor of two possible paths I could follow in the future. In fact, thanks to that I have now chosen to do something regarding Economics. All the juniors and seniors in American high schools spend a lot of time applying for colleges and, in order to get in the one they want, they take a standardized test called SAT (similar to our Invalsi), which is divided into a Math and an English part. I looked it up to see if it could do any good to me, and I saw that this test is recognized everywhere in the world and, in particular, universities such as Politecnico and Bocconi accept it as a substitute of the admissions test. Therefore I chose to take it and thanks to the score I got (1490 out of 1600) I can surely get into Politecnico and hopefully in Bocconi too (I applied and I will know the results on the 14th).

Another big difference I found is about the everyday schedule: in America, days usually start and end earlier than in Italy. My typical day starts at 5:30 a.m., it takes me around half an hour to get ready, to pack a sandwich for lunch and to make a moka (I never got used to American coffee). Then I go outside to wait for the bus and finally, forty minutes later, I arrive at school. Once I am there I usually get the free breakfast the school hands out and wait for the first period to start. At 7:15 I have to be into my first period class, which, in the first semester, was US History; each period lasts for an hour and thirty minutes. Since the school is very big and there aren't enough seats for everyone in the cafeteria, there are four different lunch periods: mine was the third one and went from 11.45 to 12.15. In the cafeteria they sell salads, pizza and burgers, so some days I buy something there. After lunch I have one more class to go to and then I

go home with Brandon, a friend of mine that lives in the same neighbourhood I did. At home I usually feed and walk the dogs and then I either study or, if I don't have any homework, I go to the gym or go out with friends. Around 6 p.m. my host family comes home and after thirty minutes we have dinner. After dinner I spend some time with Jacob and at 8:30 I go to bed and if I am not too tired I watch some TV show on Netflix.

Besides school and family, what I miss the most and what I will always keep with me are the friendships I made with some of my schoolmates and the experiences I shared with them. They were always there for me when I needed help, and without them my year would not have been the same. Some of them came to visit in July and I had the opportunity to see them again.



