

# Senior Night: An American Experience

by

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I walked quickly through the halls to find the cafeteria of the East Lansing High School. Parents are supposed to meet up before the football game against Flint Carmen-Ainsworth High School to participate in “Senior Night” this evening. The East Lansing High School was renovated three years ago; the school buildings still look new and polished, and as I walk briskly, I notice that the blue-and-white tile-flooring still glitters, and the lights hanging from the high ceiling are shining quite brightly. I hasten my pace, not wanting to be late. I smiled at the thought that my son is having the American experience of growing up in a community whose culture and tradition are rather different from the culture and tradition of the country we call home.

My thoughts rush backwards in time. It seems it was only yesterday that my son and I got through our first winter at Michigan State University. By the middle of the semester, the weather had turned very cold and snow was falling. I remember walking my son every morning to the Spartan Village Elementary School where he and his friends would wait for the bus that would take them to Red Cedar Elementary. The morning walk in the cold and snow became almost a daily ritual, broken only by the several occasions when heavy snow made it difficult to take the short-cut from our apartment to the school. On such occasions, I would drive the five minute ride to the school, where all of my son’s friends would be waiting, calling out his name as he got out of the car. They were small people then – my son and his friends were shorter than I. I remember thinking as I drove away how they looked like tall, bundled pumpkins in colorful red, blue, green and yellow winter coats, standing and shivering in the cold, waiting for the bus. They seemed not mindful of the near freezing temperatures. They were talking, playing and laughing together.

In the beginning, I was apprehensive about leaving my son in the hands of the school bus driver. However, there was little I could do to avoid this arrangement since as a newcomer, I was still looking for a car of my own. Back in my home country, elementary school children are

either driven to school by their parents or travel by public transportation accompanied by their parents. Unlike in America, the public school system in Malaysia is not endowed with enough public funds to afford organized transportations for school children. Thus, my early apprehension about letting my son ride the school bus everyday to school was quite understandable: it seemed to require little supervision and involvement on my part to ensure my son's safe transport. However, in time, I grew to trust the public school bus. These days, it even seems to me to be the most normal mode of transportation in the world for school children. I have also come to appreciate that my son learnt to be independent at an early age by participating in this simple activity. Being independent seems to be a valued trait for the individual in American society.

My son and his friends have grown since then. These days, many of my son's closest friends are his football team mates in school. They are tall, big and athletic people. They look quite imposing to me. But as I talk with them, I am almost always struck by the fact that they are merely very young teenagers, who like any average American teenager, are very quick and playful in their demeanor, and rather argumentative and challenging in their ways of thinking. I can contrast this with the quiet and obedient Malaysian teenager who does not want to challenge authority, especially not his parents'. But this is yet another aspect of raising my son in America that I have embraced and gotten used to. The contrast between the American and Malaysian teenagers reflects the differences in the influences of differing environments that affect and shape the growing teenager's individual personality, and his perception of life. Different environments generate differing experiences that will be unique to each person.

I realize now that I could have raised my son differently given we live in different places. Indeed, the way that I am raising my son in America is distinct from the way that I myself was brought up. I have made adjustments for the fact that my son is growing up in the American

culture, which is vastly different from the Malaysian lifestyle. Perhaps growing up in a more developed society like America requires a more competitive and more outspoken nature, therefore my son is bolder in expressing his views and opinion than I was at his age. Higher degrees of individuality and uniqueness are relatively more treasured in this society, while higher degrees of conformity and consensus are more treasured in an eastern society like Malaysia.

My thoughts are interrupted as I see familiar faces in the school hallway. I exchange greetings with Julie Ann, Jared's mom, and Theresa, Sam's mom. We decided that in the interest of time, we will walk directly to the football field where the Senior Night ceremony will take place in a few minutes. As we chatted while walking, my mind wanders as I look at the spectators sitting in the Lynn C. Adams Stadium. I suddenly recall the many times that I have sat in the stands watching my son play football while attempting to understand the rules and play of the game. Every time that I had attended a match, I was fascinated by the fact that in this society, high school football games seem to be a family affair, almost an outing for parents and their children. The smell of popcorn, hot chocolates, pizzas and hotdogs are as fundamental to watching the game as are the children running around the stadium, the parents educating their kids about the rules of football, the spectators cheering athletes on when their teams are about to score touchdowns, and the students commenting on athletes' statistics as they make predictions on how the game would end. It was equally impressive to me that parents and spectators alike would spend three hours in the stands cheering their teams on, undeterred neither by rain, cold and even snow. In my home country, high school games of any kind will not merit the attention of parents, and are never attended by younger children. School games are usually held during the day and before sunset; very seldom are matches allowed to run late into evening hours when it is considered unsafe for children to be outside of the house.

My wandering thoughts return to present time as I see Coach Ferraco walking towards the parents who by now are standing in line in alphabetical order. As it turns out, the Senior Night ceremony, the opening event before the game this evening, will be a memorable one for all the parents of the East Lansing Varsity football athletes. For me, it is one of the highlights of being a parent raising a child in America. The experience marks an important event for me as a proud parent, an event that I will treasure and which will remain with me for the rest of my life. I, and the other mothers and parents of the football athletes, were each handed a flower as we were congratulated by the management of the Varsity Football team. We stood with our sons by our sides in a parade. Then, each parent's and the athlete son's names were announced as we walk forward ceremoniously and in turns have our pictures taken in the football field. Spectators in the stands applauded, cheered and lauded each parent-son pair. It was a momentous occasion for me. As the camera took our pictures, I smiled broadly to show my appreciation. I realized then that athletics are very much celebrated in this culture even at the very early stage of an individual's life. Individuals are recognized and rewarded for the hard work, discipline, leadership, and teamwork they actively demonstrate through their sports. Society extends such recognition to parents in a very visible and celebratory manner.

That night as we were driving home, it occurred to me that when I return to my home country next year, I will be returning not only as a scholar trained at Michigan State University, but also as a parent whose son can understand and appreciate diversity in the cultures and traditions of different peoples and different countries. For me, my experience teaches me the many new and wonderful ways to see the world. For my son, perhaps his American experience growing up in East Lansing will allow him to see himself as a citizen of the world.