

Started as a Volunteer Experience, Ended with a New Friend

I met Bella during my Spring 2016 academic term at the University of Waterloo (UW), and a few meet-ups later, we became great friends. Bella is an international student from China, and currently studying at UW for the year. She landed in Canada a few weeks prior to our first meeting. Amongst our cultural differences, we found a common ground, similar favourites, familiar dislikes, and even though, we don't always get each other's jokes, we end up giggling together anyhow.

Between our full school and work schedules, Bella and I met once a week for at least two hours. At first, we met at a coffee shop or the school cafeteria and talked, but a few weeks later we explored town, found new places to do groceries, tried exotic cuisines, discovered a hidden petting zoo, and we even took a day-trip to Toronto. Despite our language barrier, we learned so much from each other. I taught her the Canadian ways, such as, donut and ice-cappuccino make a good study-break, best pizza places near campus, secrete study spaces, Friday night pub crawls, Facebook groups for discounted everything (textbooks, carpool, housing, etc.) and her all-time favourite, the best boutiques to shop. I also took her to Costco one weekend, and her excitement blew me away. I've never seen anyone so thrilled to roam around Costco. We spent hours snagging free samples, picking out souvenirs for her family and friends in China, showed her the best mega-box snacks, and ended the day off with Costco's famous hot dogs plus fries.

Bella introduced me to authentic Chinese cuisines. As a Canadian-raised Chinese, I have never fully been exposed to a variety of Chinese meals. Bella invited me over for hot-pot dinner with her roommates one night. She got this spicy Szechuan-style broth and twenty different types of meats, vegetables, and noodles. It was so spicy, delicious and overwhelming! She gave me all these tips and recipes for cooking Chinese and Korean meals; I still have a notebook filled with her notes. I also got my family a hot-pot stove a few weeks later and introduced everything Bella taught me to them. I am looking forward to the upcoming BBQ season and inviting Bella over for her first backyard patio meal. In addition, our similar fashion-style totally got us bonding, Bella showed me discounted online boutiques to shop for latest fashion pieces, accessories, make-up and skin care products imported from Asia.

I volunteered as a mentor with the English Conversation Partner Program via Renison University College within UW, and was partnered with Bella. I remember after our first coffee meet-up, where I placed myself in her shoes. I realized how amazing she is. She had travelled half-way across the world alone, coped with unfamiliar circumstances, made new friends, was away from family, learned English, experienced culture shock and foreign encounters, and was still managing a full academic course-load. Bella inspired, challenged, and influenced me to study abroad. I am proud and excited to confirm my study trip to Israel in August 2017, and international exchange to the National University of Singapore in January 2018.