



INTERNATIONAL
EXCHANGE



NAME

MUHAMMAD



FROM

PAKISTAN



TO

USA



PROGRAM

YES



0123456789



Like Father, Like Son: A Deaf Pakistani Student's Exchange Experience

When Muhammad, a U.S. Department of State-funded Kennedy-Lugar Youth Exchange and Study (YES) student from Pakistan, first arrived in the United States, he had no idea what to expect. But, he brimmed with excitement at the opportunity to experience life in America. His exchange experience was unique because he would be experiencing true immersion in not just one, but two non-native languages: English and American Sign Language (ASL).

Growing up in the Deaf community in Pakistan, Muhammad's primary communication was in Pakistani Sign Language (PSL), but he embraced opportunities in his country to learn ASL and English. Because ASL and PSL are very distinct and unique languages (PSL is related to Nepalese and Indian Sign Languages while ASL is related to French and European Sign Languages), Muhammad spent the months leading up to his exchange practicing his skills intensively in both languages.

MIUSA caught up with Muhammad and his host father, Ian, on video chat to learn more about Muhammad's transition from life in Pakistan to an entirely new and different culture in Seattle, Washington.

In Seattle, Muhammad was placed at a school that includes students with and without disabilities, and matched with a Deaf host family. Though there were two other Deaf/hard of hearing students at the school, this was his first experience in a predominantly hearing environment. Muhammad used ASL interpreters to support full communication access in the classroom, and at home, communicated directly with his host father in sign language.

Though his past experiences were remarkably different from that of his classmates in America, Muhammad demonstrated that with access to the right services and supports, he could experience U.S. life just like his peers.

MIUSA: Can you tell us about your life in Pakistan?

MUHAMMAD: My mother is Deaf and my father is hearing. I have two brothers, one who is Deaf like me, and one who is hearing. I attend a School for the Deaf there and really enjoy playing cricket. In Pakistan, I am in the Deaf community and all my friends are Deaf. My family was very excited for me to participate in this experience because it was a chance to improve my English and open new opportunities for my future.

MIUSA: When you first arrived in the United States, we know there were some things you had to get used to. For instance, we remember you weren't too fond of American food! How have you adjusted since then?

MUHAMMAD: Yes, the food was a challenge! I miss Pakistani food, but American food has grown on me. I also enjoy a lot of Indian food with my host father, Ian. I have really enjoyed my time in the United States.

MIUSA: What were your favorite things about your international exchange experience?

MUHAMMAD: My favorites included participating in my math, history and physical education classes, flag football and being with my friends.





The Host Father's Perspective

Muhammad's host father Ian, who is also Deaf and uses sign language to communicate, moved from India to the United States as a young adult and immersed himself in the U.S. Deaf community in the Pacific Northwest. At first, Ian was resistant to the idea of being a host father. Ian came around to the idea when he realized that he had parallel experiences he could draw upon in supporting Muhammad in his new community.

"I was in Muhammad's shoes 20 years ago when I came to the United States I see myself in Muhammad's experiences adjusting to life as a Deaf person in America and learning to communicate in ASL."

Observing Muhammad's changes throughout his exchange experience, Ian shared, "When Muhammad first came to the United States, he told me he wanted to work as a taxi driver when he finished high school. Now, he wants to go to college at the Rochester Institute of Technology in New York."

Without a doubt, Muhammad has returned home to Pakistan with a new perspective on many levels. His match with a Deaf host family gave him the chance to explore Deaf culture in the United States, connect with successful Deaf mentors, and expand his understanding of possibilities for Deaf people. And, his placement in a mainstream high school with Deaf and hearing peers has helped him build the skills to bridge communication gaps in spoken and signed languages.

Did You Know?

Linguists believe there could be up to 200 – 300 sign languages worldwide.

How to Say "Pakistan" in Sign Language



Left Hand

Hold your pointer finger straight up



Right Hand

Bring your thumb and pointer finger together to form a circle, with your other three fingers sticking straight up



Both Hands

Bring your left and right hands together to touch while they are still formed like this