

## Fengna Zheng's Story as a UWA Student

I finished my two-year college life in Guangdong University of Finance in China with enthusiasm and a vision for my future. I passed my TOEFL exam and got an American VISA. I tried to improve my English and my understanding of American culture as I began to grasp the direction of my future. I convinced my father, saying, "This dream is not just a dream for me; it is planted in my heart." So, my story with UWA began on August 5, 2011.

It was raining when we arrived on campus. Some American students took us to our dormitory. I was holding the umbrella, trying to share it with one of the American students. But she put on her hood connected with her coat and said, "No, thank you." Later, I learned that Americans don't use umbrellas a lot, unless it is raining heavily.

When I walked into the dormitory, I saw a big living room, sofa, dining table, oven, and refrigerator, which was a big difference in style compared to my Chinese dormitory. There were gifts of cookers and articles for daily use from a church for us. I felt people in this community must be very sweet because I could see they had spent a lot of time selecting the gifts.

At night, it was hard to fall asleep. I am not sure whether it was from jet lag or excitement. I was lying on my bed, knowing the UWA had already planned activities for us. And I was thinking, "What will happen next?"

I quickly learned that UWA was a big campus and very different from my home campus. UWA's entrance doesn't have security guards, surrounding walls, or contracting doors. I felt that it was an intersection because it just had direction boards on the streets. There are no obvious boundaries on the entire campus. It seems like it was mixed together with the outside world and gave me a sense of freedom instead of bondage. I felt as though I could study here like a cork. I would not be limited in a frame. I could learn something that I thought was useful, that I was curious about, and that I was interested in.

I quickly learned that I loved the Student Union which has a downstairs gym, billiards, Ping-Pong tables, treadmills, bicycle machines, and machines for strength and muscles. I could go to yoga or dancing classes there. There was even a swimming pool. Americans care about working out and will go to the gym almost every day. I didn't realize until then that physical quality was important.

American food was very different from what I had expected. I was always worried about my diet before I came to the US because I was under the impression that American food was all hamburgers, cakes, and potato chips. I was afraid I would become fatter and fatter. But, actually it was not what I thought. During Orientation, breakfast had been prepared for us. We had coffee, green tea, some dessert, and many fruits like grapes, cherries, and strawberries. I enjoyed the delicious and healthy breakfast. The campus

cafeteria served all kinds of food: fried chicken, chips with cheese, pizzas, rice, cooked vegetable, soup, salads, fruits, dessert, and various drinks. There was also an ice-cream machine and waffle machine.

After I began my classes, I joined SIFE (Students in Free Enterprise). SIFE is a non-profit worldwide organization providing college student the best opportunity to make a difference and to develop leadership, teamwork, and communication skills through learning, practicing, and teaching the principles of free enterprise. I joined because it would be a good opportunity for me to improve myself not only in language but also in my ability to get along with American and to deal with business issues. At first, I didn't know what was going on; I didn't even understand the others when they talked to me. But the people in the organization helped me understand everything step-by-step and with patience. I grew in this organization, made many friends, and was so proud of myself when I watched myself improve in every aspect little by little.

I still remember how excited I was when we went to a training conference in Dallas, Texas. Twelve people rode in a van for eleven hours, talking and laughing all the way. I felt time went fast because I really enjoyed the conversation with the American students. During the conference, I learned how to create and run a good project to improve the quality of people's lives by teaching people how to fish rather than just giving them fish. After this trip, I knew so much and later went from being a member to being the leader of a project.

Now, as I think back on my time at UWA, questions run through my mind. What if I weren't brave enough to insist on my dream of coming to America and had just stayed in China to finish my bachelor degree? What would I be like now? When I think this, I am proud of myself. I do not regret my decision at all. I remember that before I came to UWA, some people tried to persuade me not to come because they thought it was not the best choice. But had any of them been here before? No! They how could they say it was not a good choice for me? I decided that I should try it myself first. And, of course, I did!

A coin has two sides. Livingston, Alabama has its advantages and disadvantages. I knew that before I came. But I thought I should exploit and enjoy its advantages and avoid its disadvantages. That is the real test of someone's ability. During this time, I watched myself grow from a person who could not even say several sentences in English to a person who can discuss some economic or political news with my professors. I watched myself grow from a child needing parents' help to an adult who could find part time jobs, rent a house, and buy a car. I feel I am much more independent, especially in my thinking processes. I feel so good to have had a clear purpose and worked hard for it. Coming to and studying at UWA made me know what I was doing and what I wanted. I am not confused and lost any more.