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FEATURES

Foreign stronger women’s, PC movements in America

by JESSICA RUZZ

Meet Iris, Sang, and Elia. Their backgrounds differ vastly, but as foreign students at Tufts their reactions to America are surprisingly similar.

All three first-year students agreed that America was more "open" than their home nations. "People here are really friendly," said Elia, who lived in Lebanon with her family until age 14, when she left to attend The American School of Paris. Iris, shuddered at the thought of walking alone in one of the streets of France and introducing herself. "They look at you weird," she said. "Here, I find it easy to make friends."

Iris, who lived in the States until two years ago when she moved to Greece, noticed a special quality when she came back. "The pathways are paved, with signs," Iris said. "This is something we got involved in, that we are active." She felt that even during the tumult of orientation, people were reaching out to her with personal invitations to join a part of the Tufts community.

Indeed, the signs urging students to join in survived the all three international students, and perhaps most shocking were the ones advertising the Tufts Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Community and other gay/bisexual groups on campus.

Such issues are considered taboo by Sang, Iris, and Elia come from. Iris explained, "No one - what's the expression? - comes out of the closet in Greece."

Sang added, "That is NOT discussed at all."

All three students agree that people's willingness to directly address homosexuality was a function of a relatively liberal college environment as well as of American culture in general.

Previously censored and locked windows opened up on some touchier issues too. Day camp is a primary focus of extra-curricular activities at Tufts, and for these three, freshman orientation was their first introduction to the subject. "Rape is just not talked about," in Greece, Iris confided. Elia feels the issue is important, but at first she was a little confused as to why male students had to attend the rape awareness seminars. But he nodded when told that some men do not understand that no really does mean no, and that an invitation back to a woman's room (or even acceptance to go to his) is not necessarily an invitation for sex. "When I come from you wouldn't think of not this a date," he said. "Here, some girls would rather you didn't. I thought it was that PC thing again..."

Ironically, the international students scorn the political correctness phenomenon that seems to make them more comfortable here. Elia shook his head in disgust, saying, "It's ridiculous! I'm always afraid to say the wrong thing and offend someone. I opened the door for a girl, and she got insulted!"

Sang wasn't used to political correctness either, especially where women's rights are concerned. In the Philippines, he said, "the macho attitude is even worse than in America."

Greek society is also more oriented, according to Iris. "It's not back wards," she stressed, "it's just that women's issues are more low-key. Some women openly accept the idea of being a housewife."

Iris is a thoroughly modern woman, though. In the village square near her Greek summer home, "girls walk around the edges; there are only men in the middle. Not me, though," she grinned mischievously. "I just walk right through. I don't care if the old men stare. If I lived there year round, though, I probably wouldn't - it's sort of disrespectful."

There is a darker side to this aspect of Greek society, though. Iris shared an incident where a Greek friend called and said her father was physically abusing her. "I panicked, I didn't know what to do," Iris spoke to a guidance counselor at her school and learned some startling facts about Greek laws regarding child abuse and molestation. By law, a man's wife and children are his property, and can be dealt with as he sees fit. Thus her friend's father acted within his legal rights. "The best my friend can do is wait till she turns eighteen and move out."

However, Iris was quick to point out that in most ways her home city of Athens is as modern as any American city. Still, "modern" does not carry the same implication in Greece as it does in America.

Sang mentioned some differences in family dynamics. His parents are Korean, and he feels that children in the U.S. treat their parents with less respect than in his culture. "Kids sometimes call their parents by their first names here. Not there," he gasped in mock horror. "I sometimes call American families are less systematic and organized than Korean families."

Elia noticed that parent-child relationships are closer here. In Lebanon, kids usually move into college dorms without their parents' help (imagine that). Headed. "My parents are too far away to ask me what courses I'm taking."

He attributed this to their trust in his kids, but he also agreed that Lebanese parents are much less involved in their children's lives than American parents. Elia finds that the same principle applies to student-teacher relationships. Here, the relationship is often borders on friendship. "I face students eating lunch with their professors," he said.

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Shave head and find goals

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attended American-based high schools, Elia led Lebanon to avoid the civil war, but Iris and Sang felt they could get a better education in a private school. "Public schools are just in terrible shape," explained Iris.

Sang simply said, "The Philippi-ines are dirt-poor."

For Sang, in fact, it was his country's poverty that opened his eyes. "I didn't do too well in school for awhile... I was getting Cs, screwing around. Then one day I was in the car with my dad, and I saw this kid about my age. He had no shoes, and his clothes were ripped. I saw his eyes, and there was something in them... I thought, 'What the hell am I doing?' Here I am in this Mercedes, wearing this Polo shirt... I went home, shaved my head, and found some goals.' That's how Sang ended up at Tufts. 'I'm glad I did.'"

Iris, Sang, and Elia all agree on one point: their belief that America really is all it's cracked up to be. "I'm definitely glad I came here," Elia said. "I think it was a really positive thing. I love college life."