

## UNDERSTANDING AMERICANS

The US had never been a destination that I considered visiting. As a matter of fact, it was the last place I was interested in visiting because of the unfavorable impression that I, and probably most Brazilians, had of Americans. I could be wrong, but I believe that a poll would support my contention about Brazilians' feelings about Americans. This unfavorable opinion could be influenced by the Brazilian media's negativity towards Americans. When something about the USA is broadcasted or published, the theme is often about wars and/or savage capitalism, leading everybody to think that all of the American people support these things.

However, shortly after I arrived in the United States in 2004, I began to realize that I was wrong in my perceptions about Americans. Many of my notions about Americans came from the news we heard about their bad politicians. In Brazil, the news from America is about wars, destruction, the economy going down the hill, etc. and these actions are pretty much made by the politicians. Unfortunately, the politicians, in most cases, represent their "country's face". But, this does not mean that people think and act like them.

It is true that if we compare the Brazilian with the U.S. people, we will find differences. For example...

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...In Brazil, I found generous people, but the greatest example of generosity that I encountered on this odyssey came from an American who is now Artur's godfather. I met Mr. William Campbell, we call him Bill for short, in November 2005 when our mutual friend, Eliezer Barros, introduced us. Bill visited us at the Children's Institute and volunteered to teach me English. When we met, he said that I was very good in English. "How did you learn English? Did you take classes in your country?"

"No. Everything that I know, I learned here. I was forced to teach myself because I needed to communicate. But I know I need to expand my vocabulary. I still don't understand 100%."

"You are doing great. I volunteer for GPLC, which means Greater Pittsburgh Literacy Council. I'll be glad to be your tutor and please let me know if you need any kind of help."

"Thank you very much. I am desperate to improve my English. When can we start...?"

So, at least three times a week, he came to the CI and we had at least one hour of practice. Every time that he came to teach me, he would bring some food and gifts for our children. We were very pleased to have him as a friend and what Bill was bringing to us, was much more valuable than food and gifts and it was not for sale anywhere in the world. Every day, he was bringing love and solidarity. We could count on him to help in many ways; all things related to documents that we needed to file or to fill out, looking for job, taking Soraya to the doctor, etc. During the winter, he often drove Artur to his therapies. If I have to describe all of Bill's support, I swear to God, I would have to write another book. My vocabulary lacks the words to acknowledge all that he does and has done for us.

During our odyssey, we made another great friend. Mr. Randy Keech is married to a Brazilian, Ana Paula Carvalho. Randy is an instructor at the Children's Institute in Pittsburgh and Ana Paula teaches Portuguese at the University of Pittsburgh. They've been fantastic to us. What they have done for our family is an example of love. Measuring the size of Randy's heart

is like trying to measure the universe. He works with disabled kids and does so with much love. Every time Artur went to have his legs evaluated, Randy would volunteer to go along. He understood the technical terms and could help us with questions that we might have. He would also take care of Vinícius. When, in 2006, I had a severe back pain and Artur was back in the hospital, Randy took care of Vinicius for several days while I was being treated at Eliezer's house. Today Randy and Ana Paula are Vinicius' godparents.

Among our American friends, Joanne is one of the most lovable persons that I have ever met. She managed the Ronald McDonald House. When we moved to this beautiful House, Joanne immediately adopted us as her children. She had never met Artur because he was in the hospital, but she always asked about his condition. She encouraged us to have faith and keep our heads up. As the daughter of Greek immigrants, I think she could understand our situation better than others. She supported us in every way, even giving us her shoulder to cry on in times of distress. She made our first Christmas in the US one of the most unforgettable ones. Beyond bags of gifts, she brought Santa Claus to visit our children. She let Vinicius light up the magnificent Christmas lights that outlined the House. Joanne always brought hope and stability to my family and we considered her our American mother. She worked so hard for me to get a job. She truly has a heart of gold.

Talking about kindness, Fred Neumeyer comes to mind first. Not because he is my boss, but because he is a special gentleman. Patience and solidarity are some of his qualities. With his wife, Lana, they extended their hands and gave me an opportunity to rebuild my family's life when they agreed to support my application to work in the US. I have great respect for the Neumeyers.

What more can be said about Dr. Kevin Strauss? He is the most amazing person that I have ever met, a person who could be a role model for everyone. He is certainly my inspiration. He is the one who loves what he does and cares for those who are in need. His heart is immeasurable. I never imagined that I could find so much kindness in a doctor. In my country, finding a doctor like him is not easy. I've tried to understand the medical profession, the hard work, and the pressure in dealing with life and death situations. Both in Brazil and in the United States, we had to deal with all kind of doctors, the good ones, the talented ones, the bad ones, the inexperienced ones, the arrogant ones, etc. Still today, I cannot understand why some doctors don't seem to even know that they are dealing with human beings. In our odyssey, we had difficult times with some arrogant doctors, but we also met some really good-hearted doctors. But, Strauss' kindness is something beyond what I had ever seen. He is one of the faces that truly can represent this amazing American people.

Not only in the US, but everywhere, people like Bill, Randy, Joanne, Fred and Lana, and Dr. Strauss, are rare finds. They changed my flawed view about Americans. Perhaps, most Brazilians who read this book still won't agree with my opinion, but I invite them... to come here to the US and see with their own eyes that the American people are different from how our TV and newspapers picture them. As we Brazilians know our faults, the Americans also know theirs. But, it is up to each of us to become a better person and follow the examples of these good people who have been so important to my family and me.

Here in the US, kids are prepared to lead a very independent life at an early age. When they reach 16 years old, they are allowed to drive and work. Most often, young people leave home at around 18 years. When they leave their homes too early, in my opinion, the family ties

are broken. Compared to Brazil, in most cases, people live with their parents until they get married...