

Outside the Zone

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My comfort zone was small when I started with the Foreign Service. Microscopic. It was tiny and I only left it when someone forced me out. I was in a bad place before adopting the Foreign Service life. I was in a mental health hospital, actually. Prescription drugs and thoughts of suicide were problems I dealt with in those days, and though it seems strange, feeling useless and ugly was my comfort zone because I was the kid who couldn't do anything right.

I said goodbye to that past and joined my new family for the long flight to Tbilisi, Georgia. The first thing my new Mom did was toss the pills in the garbage, which was frightening until my head cleared and I started feeling peaceful and content. When I walked out of the airport I felt like I was entering a parallel world that was crazy and kind of familiar, but not really.

Within a few days, everything around me seemed bright and colorful and I was full of energy, which was good because the Foreign Service life never rests and we went to work right away. At school in the U.S. I was a "Special Needs" kid, and everyone in my old life seemed okay with that. They didn't make me work hard or try to discover myself, but that changed in Tbilisi. I couldn't just quit when things got difficult or boring, and all of the new people in my life told me that I am capable of much more. They expected me to do my best and even to succeed. After a while, I started to believe it was possible.

I am now in mainstream classes without any tutors or shadows, I scored at the top of my class on a MAP test, and I jumped ahead a grade in Writing and Literature. I even stood up in front of a group of classmates and parents and recited a poem that I had written myself. I was frozen with fear at first, but then I saw that people were listening and enjoying what I was saying, I discovered that I love to perform.

The Special Needs label was a big fence around my comfort zone that locked me in and kept others out. I could hide behind it when classes were difficult or when I didn't want to work or deal with people. I even used it to get out of uncomfortable social situations, which *really* doesn't work in the Foreign Service! Sometimes I think the people here look for difficult experiences.

I always feared these new experiences because I thought change would only make my life worse, but that attitude didn't work in the Foreign Service. It used to be that when I worried about falling behind in school or about being unable to do things that were simple for other kids, and I would escape by watching Scooby Doo cartoons for hours at a time. When I wasn't in the mood to do schoolwork, I could pretend not to understand something until the adults gave up and let me play with my cat. I wasn't being sneaky or lazy, but that was the only way I knew how to deal with the embarrassment and shame I used to feel.

I've grown a lot in two years and I have been out of my comfort zone every minute of that time. It was 24/7 because I started this journey with a brand new family. I love them and can never thank them enough for what they have done for me, but they were basically strangers at the time.

The Foreign Service lifestyle is all about trying new things, and I've done a lot of that since coming to Georgia. I have visited seven countries, learned a little Georgian, Russian, and Ukrainian, and earned a green belt in Taekwondo. I even started singing. This was a big surprise because I never talked much in the past, but the words just came out of me one day and I have learned that singing is a great way to express my thoughts and emotions all at once.

I also beat some old problems here. For example, I learned to tie my shoes, I made my first true friend, and I am now good at dressing myself and doing my own hair. I know I'm years late in these accomplishments, but I wouldn't have dreamed before coming here that I could handle even one of them. I've checked them off my *To Do* list and made room for bigger successes, and this year I will learn to ride a bike, ski Gudauri, and bake *khachapuri*.

The challenge at school will continue to get harder and I understand that I need to put more and more effort into my work to get me through middle school and move on to high school. I'm planning to go to college now, too.

I finally feel good about myself, which is something I won't change. The most important lesson I learned in the Foreign Service life is that I should define myself by what I can do, and not by what I cannot do, and the only way to grow is to step outside the zone and try more things.

Without my new family and this bizarre lifestyle, I never would have discovered who I really am. That old comfort zone seems so small and uninteresting now, and when I saw that I had outgrown it, I began to see hope for my future and even picked out a new name for my new self—Eva. The name means *new life* and I think it fits perfectly.