

50 JOBS IN 50 STATES

*One Man's Journey of
Discovery Across America*



*How I Turned Rejection into Opportunity
and Dreams into Reality*

Daniel Seddiqui

An Excerpt From

***50 Jobs in 50 States:
One Man's Journey of Discovery Across America***

by Daniel Seddiqui
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SOUTH DAKOTA

WEST VIRGINIA



MASSACHUSETTS

NORTH CAROLINA



MAINE

OREGON



HAWAII



OHIO



OKLAHOMA



INDIANA

Daniel A. Seddiqui

Employment Goal: 50 jobs in 50 states in 50 weeks!

Prologue: Believing in My Idea When No One Else Did, xi

EXPERIENCE



Reality Hits But No Turning Back, 1

UTAH LDS Humanitarian Services Worker, 2
COLORADO USGS Hydrologist, 7
SOUTH DAKOTA Rodeo Announcer, 11
NORTH DAKOTA Cartographer, 16
MINNESOTA Medical Device Machinist, 20
IOWA Agronomist, 24
NEBRASKA Corn Farmer, 28



Hitting Rock Bottom and Rebounding, 35

WYOMING National Park Service Ranger, 36
MONTANA General Store Clerk, 43
IDAHO Real Estate Agent, 47
WASHINGTON Marine Biologist, 50



Turning Obstacles into Openings, 55

OREGON Logger, 56
NEVADA Vegas Weddings Coordinator, 62
ARIZONA United States Border Patrol Agent, 67
NEW MEXICO Landscape Architect, 72
KANSAS Meatpacker, 76



Not Just about Me Anymore, 83

MISSOURI Boilermaker, 84
ARKANSAS Archaeologist, 88
OKLAHOMA Roustabout, 91
TEXAS Petroleum Engineer, 95
LOUISIANA Bartender, 99
MISSISSIPPI Dietitian, 104



Halfway Point Is Getting Rough, 109

WISCONSIN Cheese Maker, 110
ILLINOIS Transit Ticket Agent, 115
MICHIGAN Auto Mechanic, 120
OHIO Meteorologist, 125



Hitting My Stride and Taking Control, 131

INDIANA Racing Pit-Crew Member, 132
VERMONT Sugar Maker, 136
KENTUCKY Horseman, 141
TENNESSEE Music Studio Technician, 146
ALABAMA High School Football Coach, 150



Returning a Different Person, 157

GEORGIA Peanut Sheller, 158
FLORIDA Theme Park Entertainer, 165



New Curves and Bumps in the Road, 171

SOUTH CAROLINA Golf Caddie, 172
NORTH CAROLINA Model and Modeling Agent, 178
WEST VIRGINIA Coal Miner, 183
VIRGINIA Monticello Gardener, 189
MARYLAND Seafood Restaurant Cook, 192
DELAWARE Incorporation Specialist, 196



Adapting to New and Different Cultures, 201

PENNSYLVANIA Amish Woodworker, 202
NEW JERSEY Boys and Girls Club Counselor, 208
NEW YORK Internet Marketing Specialist, 213



Hitting Curveballs, 219

RHODE ISLAND Ambassador of Tourism, 220
CONNECTICUT Insurance Broker, 224
MASSACHUSETTS Baseball Scout, 229
NEW HAMPSHIRE Political Party Worker, 235
MAINE Lobsterman, 241



Finishing a Journey and Embarking on New Dreams, 249

ALASKA Commercial Photographer, 250
HAWAII Surfing Instructor, 254
CALIFORNIA Winery Cellar Master, 259

Epilogue: A Lesson from America, 267

EDUCATION

About the Author, 273

PROLOGUE

BELIEVING IN MY IDEA WHEN NO ONE ELSE DID

*“You have to go through a lot of nightmares
before you realize your dream.”*



fter six-and-a-half grueling laps of jumping barriers and water pits, it was down to the last lap. I was at the Pacific-10 Track & Field Championships, representing the University of Southern California in the steeplechase. It was my last collegiate race and I had been training like a seasoned Olympian in hopes of breaking the university’s long-standing record. I was on the final lap of the race – a lap away from experiencing another nightmare.

I stepped onto the final barrier. My foot slipped on its slick surface. Tumbling into the water, I hit my shin. I was down. The filthy puddle splashed into my mouth, making me gag as I tried to prop myself up. I watched my competitors pass me while memories of falling during my final high school race loomed. *Same results, last place*, I thought.

My parents walked away in disappointment. My coach reacted the same way. All our hard work and scrupulous effort had been futile. I knew it: I was a loser. My defeat seemed to begin the day I finished dead last in that race, one day after I graduated from college, and it didn’t cease in the years that followed.

Initially, after graduating from USC with a degree in economics, I tried to stay in Southern California. I filled out job applications,

sent resumes, took aptitude tests, and knocked on doors looking for an entry-level position related to my field – from accounting to investment banking. With every interview, I was confident I had the right skill set, education, work ethic, and personality for the job. Yet despite an encouraging interview, the employer always left me with notorious words: “We went with someone else.”

For months, I landed one interview after another, but never earned an offer. Each time I followed up, it was the same story – I didn’t have enough experience for the entry-level position. “I hope you’re not coming back to live with us,” my dad emphasized. My parents grew concerned and frustrated. Still, they did everything possible to provide me with support: enrolling me in career counseling, professional interview courses, and resume-building sessions.

My dad had taught me something that always resonated with me: Be aggressive and persistent. Once, when I was in college, he dropped me off at a buffet restaurant in the hope I would find a summer job as a dishwasher. I had worked at another outlet in the restaurant chain and was wearing the company uniform and name tag. “You’ve got to work,” my dad said as I left the passenger seat. I walked into the restaurant looking for the manager, who was confused when he saw me in full uniform, as though I had stolen it from another employee.

“I’m looking for a job here, since I worked at another location,” I explained.

“I see you have the uniform already,” the manager said.

“Yes, just register me on the payroll and I’m ready to start.”

“Do you speak Spanish?”

“Not really.”

“We’re looking for someone who speaks Spanish,” he reasoned. Even in a basic, entry-level position, I still couldn’t land a job.

After three months and failing a dozen interviews in Southern California, I was running out of money. My mom suggested I return home to the San Francisco Bay Area, where she thought I might catch a break finding a job. *Maybe Los Angeles is too competitive*, I

thought. But when I moved back home, my humiliation deepened. I was ashamed to use my parents as a safety net. I knew I was a capable college graduate, but my pride was deteriorating and my self-esteem started to fade.

I continued my job search in the Bay Area, but had no more luck than in Southern California. I would make presentations for potential employers, receive positive feedback after my interviews, and return home bragging to my parents. But as I waited for potential employers to reply, there was never an offer. After forty-plus consecutive failed interviews, I knew something in my life had to change.

My parents didn't help the situation; in fact, they exacerbated it. Both my parents had lived the American Dream, coming from nothing and working their way to success. My mom, a New Jersey native, had been working since she was a teenager. My dad immigrated to the United States from Afghanistan on his own when he was only sixteen, making ends meet to pay for his education before becoming a successful entrepreneur. I had always maintained a close relationship with my parents, which might have been the reason for their pressure and disappointment. The more failure I experienced, the more their support for me diminished. "You're a loser, a disgrace to USC," my mom would say, guiltily me over the free room and board at their house. My dad would throw me out of bed at 5:00 a.m. to do chores and look for jobs. They couldn't understand why I had not found one after going on several third-round interviews and being a runner-up. As a result, our house became a war zone.

Growing desperate, I was eager to try a new career path. So I decided to channel my athletic background and love of sports into coaching. I spent two months sending over 18,000 e-mails to every collegiate coach in the country, only to earn an offer to volunteer for the women's cross-country team at Northwestern University. My parents were happy to see me off, and I moved to Chicago – supplementing the coaching position with odd jobs, from painting my landlord's houses to part-time accounting.

After the season at Northwestern, I volunteered for a position coaching with the University of Virginia's football team. When that

position also failed to become paid, I knew I had to move on again. I accepted another volunteer coaching position with the track team at the University of Georgia, but soon realized that as a volunteer coach, I was swallowed up in another vicious cycle of failure: The positions never led to paid full-time. Before moving to Georgia to continue the cycle, I decided to visit Florida during spring break with the little money I had saved from working in Virginia at Bed Bath & Beyond. And that's really where it all began.

I was riding a train from Orlando to West Palm Beach, Florida, touring aimlessly around the state. Beside me on the two-hour train ride sat a gentleman who asked, "What do you do for a living?" At the time, straddling volunteer coaching and odd jobs as I was, I couldn't give him a straight answer.

"Well, right now, I'm trying to work my way up to a full-time coaching position," I told him. He was impressed with my perseverance and dedication, he told me after I shared how the past three years of my life had been such a struggle.

"I like your character. You have a lot of potential," he said. "Contact me if you're looking to work as a regional manager for CVS Pharmacies." *A job offer? A real job offer?* I wasn't even wearing a suit! I hadn't even been called for an interview! He never even saw my resume! I couldn't believe it. The job he offered wasn't coaching, and working as a CVS manager wasn't something I ever thought I'd do, but he handed me his business card as we both got off the train. He went his way; I went mine.

Staring at his card, I reflected on his proposition and my current situation, lost in my own career path—or lack thereof. I thought of how different my life would be if I moved to yet another state. I thought of the different industries and contrasting cultures throughout the U.S., and my curiosity was piqued. I had spent the first three years of college at the University of Oregon, before transferring to USC. When I lived in Oregon, I thought of the loggers. When I lived in Chicago, I always thought of the trains. Living in Virginia made me think of the state's rich history. There in Florida, I couldn't stop thinking of the amusement parks. There was

so much to the country that I hadn't yet seen, and as I tried to find a career path that was the best match for my own personality and interests, there was still so much left to discover.

My mind began to race, and I had an epiphany. I thought of working a stereotypical job in each state. I wanted to live the map. As a child, I was always intrigued by maps, studying them for hours at a time, envisioning how people lived across America or how different I would be if I grew up in a different environment. When it occurred to me to work fifty jobs in fifty states, it was as though I had realized a dream I never knew I had – like waking up from a lifetime of pursuing the wrong path. Despite the struggle I had experienced since college, I had found ways to fulfill my curiosity about different cultures and environments – but this idea would also give me a chance to experience *jobs*. As my spirits lifted in excitement, I went to Georgia after spring break, as planned. In the weeks that remained until my coaching position started, I sold kitchens at Home Depot and worked vigorously on a plan to pursue fifty jobs.

I had no clue how to go about it, so I started by composing a resume of the most quintessential American jobs – one for each state, representing the culture and economy of each. It came to me like a natural instinct – without hesitation or second thoughts. Before my coaching position in Georgia even began, I knew I needed to return to California to make my vision a reality. With my college network in Southern California and my family in Northern California, I figured that if I returned to the state, I would have better luck constructing a plan, recruiting sponsors, and even selling my idea as a television show.

I left Georgia after one month. That also meant leaving Sasha. We had met in Atlanta, and she had become a close friend and ally. When I felt most alone and defeated, Sasha would encourage me to believe in myself. Though she was temperamental, I found her to be fun and kindhearted. As our friendship evolved, my feelings for her evolved too. I felt like nobody else existed when we hung out, and I believed we were meant to be together, but despite her incessant flirting, she claimed she did not want to be with me. Still, she

left me with a glimmer of hope: “I would be lying if I said there’s no potential between us,” she told me before I left Georgia.

Sasha was the first girl to tell me she cared about me, and she encouraged me to fulfill the vision of my project. After so much adversity, I needed just one person in the world to believe in me, to make me feel that maybe, if I went for it, I could make the fifty jobs happen. Sasha was that person, that sole advocate, and in turn, I made a promise to her that I would return to Georgia a success.

I went back to Southern California, rented a car, and lived out of it until I could make ends meet. I was not welcomed back home by my parents. I shared my idea with them, but they immediately wrote it off as a waste of time, destined to fail. Though I now had a goal – my mission to work fifty jobs – I still needed to earn money until the dream became a reality. I was back to interviewing for office jobs – and back to being rejected.

After three jobless years, I found myself back to the same nightmare I had lived the last time I was in California. I bought a new suit from Macy’s to wear on a job interview that “I had no real intention of keeping unless I actually got the job,” I told myself. The interview was canceled as I was driving to it. That very night, I went back to Macy’s to return the doomed suit. Walking back to my rental car, my three years of failure followed me like a dark cloud. I was overcome with defeat. I had no alternatives. I had no place to go, nobody to turn to. I had been sleeping in that rental car for weeks. I was hungry. I was thirsty. I was at an ultimate low, as low as a sober person could go. I didn’t care about myself anymore. All I had was an idea.

I got in the rental car and pulled out of the Macy’s parking lot, driving aimlessly on the freeway. Within moments, a semitruck violently cut me off, and the car swerved into a curb, nearly hitting a wall. My heart was throbbing. I was scared and felt delusional from lack of food and exhaustion. I got off the highway to park and catch my breath, but I completely broke down. Slumped over the steering wheel, I sobbed until I was out of breath. My face shivered. I had never felt such a low before or such worthlessness. I picked up

the phone and called my house. My dad answered, wondering why I was crying. I explained that I almost got into a car accident.

“You don’t have insurance. What are you doing? How come you never listen to us? Why can’t you keep a stable life?” he scolded me. Fortunately, my mom was more sympathetic and urged me to come home and rejuvenate myself. As I returned home to the fortress of failure, I resolved that I was tired of waiting for employers to determine my destiny. I was tired of waiting for opportunities to come my way. Throughout my life, I had been given advice, strategies, tools for success, but in the end, no matter how much coaching, I was the one who had to run the race. And I was the only one who could control the outcome.

Without a penny to my name, I had nothing to lose. I had planned on turning my idea into a television show, but regardless, whether I should pursue my vision of Living the Map was no longer a question. There was no reason not to.

As soon as I made up my mind to make it happen, nothing was going to stop me. My parents weren’t interested and didn’t want to hear about it, so I discreetly worked on my project, developing the plan and building a web site. My uncle told me, “If the *why* is strong enough, the *how* becomes easy,” and though lining up jobs was anything but easy, committing myself to making it work was.

I sat in my childhood bedroom making phone calls to employers across the country for sixteen hours of each summer day. I kept a log of every person I called, tracking responses. Some laughed at me, some hung up on me, and others made no attempt to hide their skepticism. I had heard “no” before and it didn’t matter anymore. I wanted to do this, however many rejections I faced.

A big concern was how to pay for this journey. I figured it would cost well over \$100,000 to fly from state to state, stay in motels, and rent cars to drive to work. But I had no money. My first idea was to find sponsors. I contacted car dealerships, figuring that if one gave me a car, it would reduce the costs. I knew I’d need a car with enough room in the back for sleeping, to avoid spending money on accommodations. I contacted other potential sponsors as well, like energy

drink companies, but from everyone, all I heard was “no.” So I looked for ways to greatly reduce the cost and make the journey “pay as I go.” I decided to drive from state to state and plan my route strategically to make the most headway in the shortest distance. This required coordinating the jobs based on the states I’d be passing through in a logical pattern so that it wasn’t too time-consuming, taxing, and expensive to drive from job to job. Even if I slept in the back of a car and avoided paying for motels, there would be substantial driving expenses, as well as other costs like food and insurance.

I knew it was critical to actually get paid, but I never outright asked employers to pay me because it was hard enough to land a job in the first place. I just wanted the job. But I hoped that if I performed well, they wouldn’t let me leave without giving me some sort of compensation. I couldn’t hold out any longer: I had to get out there and let whatever happened happen. I figured that if I started the journey, I could try to make ends meet on the road. Who knows? I might pick up a sponsor along the way. And even if I were to get paid, I had no way to estimate how much I would earn. But I figured that since I had been able to spend a week on vacation in Florida for under one hundred dollars, I might be able to do the same in every state. Plus, it had a nice ring to it: 50 Jobs in 50 States in 50 Weeks. I wouldn’t have guessed at the time, but as it turned out, I ended up working as a volunteer in just five states.

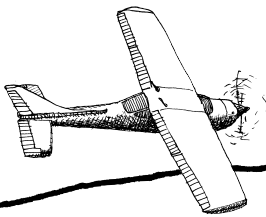
In the meantime, my parents were on the verge of kicking me out again. “Just one more month!” I begged. I made hundreds of calls per state in the four months since I started the project, willing to work in any state with any employer who could fulfill my objective. I had invested so much of myself that even after months of more rejection, I could not surrender. I knew I needed only one break for everything to fall into place. And sure enough, it was only a matter of time before my persistence finally paid off. I found the Nebraska Corn Board Association online and called to ask if anyone there knew of farmers I could work with for a week. A staffer put me in touch with a farmer who could use an extra set of hands. Soon after, I lined up a position at a general store in Montana during that state’s hunting season.

After setting up ten jobs, I knew I had to leave the house before another war broke out. I had no option but to set up the rest of my jobs while on the road. My brother opened a line of credit for me at his bank to purchase my first car. I maxed out the account with a \$5,000 Jeep Cherokee. It was almost September and I was ready to start my journey, planning to hit the Midwest before the winter months. I called my local newspaper and it jumped on the story.

The article made front-page news and hit the wire to larger papers. Within days, a television producer contacted me about turning my idea into a reality show. Being the host of a television show about working across America was my dream and I was thrilled, but after giving it some thought, I realized that if a TV crew was involved, everything would change. People would treat me differently. I'd risk being scripted – or worse, I'd risk control over the project. I had already done the groundwork, lining up the first ten jobs through countless rejection. My life led me to this journey – all the failure, defeat, and struggle I'd been through had brought me here. I wanted to see it through the way I intended.

“Do you want your own show?” the producer of *Dirty Jobs* asked me. It was my dream come true – after searching for months for a sponsorship, finally, someone was interested. But this time, I wasn't. I wanted to experience America, and no network or television show would direct my journey, or even tag along for the ride.

“I'm going to do this organically,” I replied, “on my own.”



NORTH DAKOTA

Fargo

SOUTH DAKOTA

Oelrichs

COLORADO

Denver

Salt Lake City

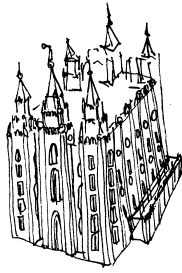
UTAH



1

Reality Hits But
No Turning Back





UTAH

LDS HUMANITARIAN SERVICES WORKER

As he handed me a check for \$250, my dad made no effort to hide his doubt that I could complete my journey. “See you in three weeks,” he uttered skeptically. With tears in her eyes, my mom sprayed Windex across my car windows and promptly wiped the glass clean. Standing beside us, my brother videotaped my departure with the precious Sony camera I had purchased on credit just a few days earlier. I took two cases of water from my dad and put them on the floor of the car. With every move, my body shivered. Anticipating the journey ahead, I was shrouded in uncertainty. My throat choked up as though bricks were stacked from my stomach to my neck. I swallowed the emotion, climbed in my Jeep, and reversed out of the driveway.

This is it; no turning back. My mind raced as I repeated the words: *No turning back.* I was scared. I knew there was a chance I wouldn’t succeed, but I had flushed the possibility from my mind. Failure simply wasn’t an option, no matter what obstacles I encountered over the next fifty weeks. While I drove slowly through the familiar streets of my hometown toward the on-ramp of the highway – the on-ramp of my journey – the car was silent. I had turned off my cell phone. The radio was off. But my mind was rambling. *Where am I going to end up tonight? Where will I eat? Do I have enough money to eat? Should I cash the check my dad gave me?* Ambivalence hammered through my thoughts like static noise, and I needed to drown it out before it got the best of me.

It was a thousand miles to Salt Lake City; I was nervous and drove cautiously, trying not to let worry overwhelm me. I could not afford to have my car break down or get a ticket on top of the historically high price of gas. Before starting the climb over California's High Sierra, I pulled over at a truck stop to stretch my legs. As I headed across the parking lot, I couldn't help but notice all the different people passing through, ambling in and out of the rest room, walking to their cars. *Lots of people live their lives on the road*, I thought. *Now I'm doing it, too*. I was just starting out and had a long way to go—I knew I'd be crossing many borders. As I watched those around me, I realized that my anxiety came from anticipation of something entirely new, something I had never done before, but just because it was new to me didn't mean it was wrong, unsafe, or foolish. A sense of calm and renewed confidence replaced my stress. Driving on, as I admired the scenery, I became preoccupied thinking about documenting my journey. I thought about the web site I had recently created, and I brainstormed topics for the first entry in my online journal. I was tempted to set up my camera and chronicle the picturesque ride. In the meantime, I looked forward to staying with relatives in Utah, whom I hadn't seen in years.

To break up the drive, I decided to spend the night in Reno, Nevada. I parked the car near a university for the night and reluctantly crawled into my sleeping bag in the back of the Jeep. I had slept in the back of a car before, but this time, I was in an unfamiliar environment and was uncertain of the neighborhood just outside my car door. As I tried to sleep, Sasha called. "You're sleeping in your car?" She was concerned, but also expressed criticism. "Why are you too cheap to get a motel?"

"I don't have money for that; I need to save," I explained, not for the first time.

"Well, have a good night. Call me tomorrow." Much of the day, I was distracted by anxiety and anticipation, but as Sasha and I hung up, the noise of the day completely subsided. I was alone in a sleeping bag in the back of my car hoping all that I was putting myself through would be worth it. I locked my eyes shut to fall asleep, but



The statue of Brigham Young in front of the Mormon Temple.

every time a car passed, I popped up to check if it was a cop. I knew it was illegal to sleep in a car on the street within city limits, but I was desperate. The combination of anxiety and the chilly night air of the high desert kept me awake. After tossing and turning into the early hours of the morning, I decided to give up on sleep and start driving into the sunrise.

“Welcome to Utah.” As the sign approached, I pulled over and stared contemplatively. *I made it! This is real!* State Number One, job Number One – working for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. Historically, Mormons had settled in Utah in the mid-1800s to escape the persecution they faced in other states. Given the Mormon influence, the decision to work for the LDS in that state was easy; landing an actual job, however, was close to impossible. The Mormon church typically prefers to hire Mormons. I wanted to avoid the question, “Are you a Mormon?” So I did everything I could to deflect it, answering questions conservatively and with extra courtesy. I didn’t want to give any reason that might hinder the possibility of getting a job, so I didn’t mention the objective of my trip. Ultimately, I settled for volunteering at the church’s Humanitarian

Center. This was not my ideal choice – I didn’t know how I could make ends meet by working volunteer jobs. Still, I was eager to get started, both for the week and for the year ahead. I stayed with my Uncle Mike and his wife Linda, who provided a gentle buffer as I adjusted to my new life; I knew I’d be spending many nights of the year in the back of the Jeep or in a stranger’s house (if I was lucky), so staying with family was an ideal way to kick off the trip.

The Humanitarian Center is a warehouse located in an industrial part of Salt Lake City, which is nestled in the mountains. An associate was expecting me on my first day. “Thank you so much for donating your time. This is a great blessing,” she stated gratefully as she handed me meal cards. *Wow, an all-you-can-eat buffet for lunch*, I thought.

“Do you have vending machines here?” I asked, curious to address a stereotype of Mormons and caffeine.

“Yes, down the hall.”

“Do you have Coke?”

“Yes, we do!” the associate told me. I was surprised – I didn’t think Mormons drank Coca-Cola. I went down the hall to get a drink and check it out for myself, and sure enough, there were Cokes in the vending machine – but they were caffeine-free, which made me laugh to myself.

I was set for the week, but I needed to work hard – I needed to set the tone for my trip, my project, my conscience. I knew I would have to learn this job and all my jobs quickly if I was going to make the project worthwhile. I wanted, as much as possible, to be treated as a normal employee, not as a visitor. I looked around the facility and spotted a quote on the wall: “We are to feed the hungry, to clothe the naked, to provide for the widow, to dry up the tear of the orphan, to comfort the afflicted, whether in this Church, or in any other, or no church at all . . .” I felt humbled by these words and motivated to make my best effort for their cause.

My task for the week was to package Hygiene Kits to send to Louisiana for victims of Hurricane Gustav. The Church planned to send out 500,000 kits, each containing a comb, toothbrush,

toothpaste, towel, soap, and brochures from the church. Dressed to impress in their suits and neckties, each group of associates had a quota of kits to produce; if one team slowed down, another would have to pick up the slack. I tried to keep a fast pace, but it was tedious work; I noticed I wasn't the only one glancing at the clock as the day wore on. Still, despite pressure to meet our quotas, all my coworkers appeared grateful to be working there. Only after I heard their stories, did I understand why. I was working side by side with refugees from Africa and Southeast Asia who were part of a program run by the church called "Developing Self-Reliance." The program teaches English, provides job training, prepares participants for employment, and finally – after two years – offers them job placement.

Hearing what my coworkers had been through made me reflective and subdued. Preparing for my fifty-state odyssey, I had spent energy worrying about traveling alone, being far from home, working for weeks at a time, spending money, and the general unpredictability of the year ahead. Yet here was a group of people who had fled from war-torn countries and lived through tragedy I would never know. Their experiences reminded me of my dad's family and their struggle under similar circumstances. Both had experienced corrupt governments, persecution, marginalization, and forced migration. At the Humanitarian Center, these refugees would work for two years. They had to make money for their families and acclimate to a new life – a new country, a new language, a new existence – completely foreign to anything they had ever known. We had come to this church in Utah for different reasons, though we both left home and were starting over. Nonetheless, I was humbled by the refugees. I knew the fear and concern I felt about the weeks ahead was nothing compared with what my fellow warehouse workers had been through. "We're blessed every day. We accept whatever path God chooses for us," one had explained. Despite our differences – and thanks to our similarities – I could relate. *Whatever God chooses, I thought. No turning back.*



COLORADO

USGS HYDROLOGIST

I decided to drive through Wyoming to get to Colorado, and soon after crossing the state line, the flat, colorless landscape changed to mountains and green meadows: the cloud covering dissolved as the sun blazed in the azure sky. Wyoming's rocky terrain was overcome by enormous snow-covered mountain ranges and I wondered if every state would transform as swiftly when I entered. I wondered if I could transform that way, too.

As I approached Denver, I called Katie Thomas, a fellow USC alum, to let her know I was on my way. I found her through a college alumni network on Facebook. Though we'd never met, she was willing to let me crash on her couch for the week. When I arrived at her apartment an hour later, she had just returned from a 10K race. "There's always some athletic event in this city," she explained. When she took me to a city park to play football with her friends, I realized I was having trouble adjusting to the higher altitude: I had a bad headache and suffered shortness of breath. Still, I couldn't help but notice the prominent bike lanes and throngs of joggers everywhere. Everyone seemed so active and energetic; I could understand why Denver is rated one of the healthiest cities in the U.S.

My first weekend in Colorado was relaxing and fun. The calm, pleasant atmosphere eased my transition and I was excited about the week ahead. Katie was welcoming, her apartment was comfortable, the scenery was beautiful, and I felt right at home in an active community of runners and outdoor sports. The concerns I had only a week earlier began to subside as I looked forward with relief

and excitement to working as a hydrologist with the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) at the Denver Federal Center. I had secured an internship with the agency after calling both private and federal organizations. Water is an essential life resource – we need it to live, it’s critical to irrigation, and it provides habitat for animals. To assure safe, clean water needed to survive, it’s vital to have information on water quality and composition. That’s where the USGS comes in. The agency works to protect us by studying water and providing scientific information others can use to purify and protect the water we consume.

I chose hydrology in Colorado because the state’s rivers, which originate in the Rocky Mountains, are a significant water source for much of the West. Half our country’s drinking water comes from rivers, and the other half comes from aquifers, which, like oil reserves, are underground. Once depleted, they are difficult to restore.

After a few days, I understood from experience at least one of the things hydrologists do: hike on trails with ski poles and water containers to collect water samples from reservoirs, canals, and rivers. Every morning, my colleagues and I put on waders (waterproof pants and boots) and life vests and drove deep into the mountains on some of the highest roads in the country. After driving as far as we could, we hiked in farther and waded into rivers to collect samples. It wasn’t *that* simple – the current was often so powerful, I was knocked off balance, nearly dropping the bottles and testing equipment. Once the samples were secured, we tested them on-site for oxygen content, turbidity, and pH before submitting them to water treatment centers. In addition to sampling, we measured discharge rates (flow volume). Taking samples was a long, monotonous process. To avoid contaminating them, we had to be very cautious, wearing rubber gloves and quickly securing the samples into Ziploc bags. Despite the tedious nature of the work, I loved trudging through the streams. I loved the cool air, warmth of the sun, and working outdoors. My coworkers were friendly, inviting, and informative, which made the job even more pleasant. One of the interesting things I learned from



Carefully measuring the discharge rate every three feet, across the Big Thompson River.

them is that when rain hits the surface of a river or other body of water, the chemistry of the water changes instantly. Jason, one of my colleagues, told me, “If you’re interested in hydrology to strike it rich, you’d be in the wrong profession.” It was clear: Everyone there was genuine and committed to ensuring the water we drink is clean and safe.

I didn’t see Katie much because my work hours were so long (mostly due to the two-and-a-half-hour commute twice a day). I continued to have trouble sleeping – but this time, it was because my mind raced with excitement. I was in stimulation mode: Everything was new, interesting, invigorating. At night, I couldn’t wait for the next morning, to start over and take it all in again. Each evening, when I was preparing for the next day, I took a few minutes to catch up with my biggest fan: Sasha.

“What’s going on tomorrow?” she asked.

“Research in the watersheds!” I was excited – after only a few days as a hydrologist, I was scheduled to attend a national conference with all the experts. Everything was going better than I imagined, I told Sasha, with only one exception. “I’m really concerned about my web site,” I confessed. This was important to me because the web offered the best way to stay connected during my trip. I had been relying on my cousin to keep my site updated, but it had become stagnant.

“I can do it. I’ll even improve the layout for you.” Sasha volunteered, and I couldn’t have been happier. Problem solved; everything was smooth and steady.

The next day, as part of the conference, we went into the field to collect more samples. We took a shuttle bus 10,000 feet up a mountain, where we rendezvoused with a group of thirty hydrologists and climbed an additional 2,000 feet to conduct research near the summit. To avoid the risk of getting my camera wet from rain predicted that afternoon, I left it on the shuttle bus. When we returned to the bus after seven hours in the field, my camera was gone. Immediately, panic set in. The bus driver told me he had left it at the conference center. I was flabbergasted – the camera was a huge investment for me and though my year was just beginning, it already carried many memories I could not get back. When we returned to the center, I rampaged through the lobby searching hysterically. I spotted the camera sitting by itself on a table. I was shocked that it hadn’t been snatched up. From that moment on, it was attached to my body, no matter what. I couldn’t risk losing it again.

Despite that panic, I realized as I left Colorado that my anxiety about the weeks ahead had subsided. The shock of leaving home and of my new life on the road began to diminish. Nonetheless, though everything was going so smoothly, I didn’t want to get too comfortable too soon. There were many borders yet to cross. Just about everything about the year ahead remained uncertain; however, as time went on I was less afraid.

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