

Lindsay

It was Ronald Reagan who said "There are no constraints on the human mind, no walls around the human spirit, no barriers to our progress except those we ourselves erect." To me, this means that the only barriers that really exist are ones we believe to be real in our minds.

The weather was warm and clear on the morning of June 16, 2007. I hadn't been able to sleep in anticipation of the arrival of my Chinese exchange student, Fu Xiaohan, or Lisa, as she preferred to be called in America. She and I had spent weeks emailing about her likes and dislikes and what she wished to do with her time in Vermont. I had spent hours fantasizing about all the fun things we would do and how we would be best friends. All of these expectations seemed to vanish the moment she stepped off the bus. I suddenly grew shy and unsure. I didn't know how to greet her or even how to react to her arrival. I was mute. My mind was racing, yet I came up with nothing to say. Luckily, my mother came to the rescue, walking up to Lisa and taking her bags, inquiring about how her trip to Vermont was. She must have been as nervous as I was, seeing as she only answered with one word; "fine."

Most of our week was spent much the same way. I'd ask a simple question and she would reply with as little as necessary to get the point across. My mother begged me to reach out, explaining to me that she was just nervous and that if I opened up, she was sure to as well. But I was terrified that the language barrier would be too much to overcome. I was also afraid that she wouldn't understand my humor and think that I was strange if I spoke up and said what was on my mind. This was how things proceeded until the night before she left.

Lisa was sitting in the living room gazing at a photo we had taken with my group of Americans as well as their exchange students. I sat down next to her timidly, careful not to get too close. I leaned over to look at the picture in her hands. Lisa turned to me.

“He looks like a gorilla man.” she laughed.

All I could do was stare at her in awe, searching for words. I failed and burst out laughing as well. Soon we were doubled over, laughing in unison, tears streaking both of our happy faces. Once we composed ourselves we continued to look at the picture.

She and I would take turns pointing out the “spicy” boys and gossiping about the other kids in the photo. Soon enough we were surrounded by a sea of yearbooks and photos, unable to keep the smiles from our faces. Her choices in men were odd to me, but we were bonding nonetheless. I didn’t want the night to end. After all this time of tip-toeing around each other I learned it all could be eliminated with a photo. How something so simple can break what I thought was such a massive barrier was beyond me. I guess it just goes to show that Ronald Reagan may have been on to something when he said that barriers were all figments of our imaginations.

Early the next morning Lisa had to leave and continue with her tour of the United States. Her next stop was New York City. After hugging my family and saying good bye, I walked her to the bus. When I turned to face her, I realized there were tears streaming down her cheeks. She hated to leave me just as much as I hated to watch her go. We had gotten to spend such little time together and there was so much more we had to learn about one another. The bus driver honked his horn and urged us to hurry up. Clumsily, I stepped forward and embraced her. I told her that I was sad to see her go

and that I would e-mail her as often as possible. I promised her that we would see each other again, whether I made the trip to China, or she came back to the US. We would meet again. This barrier that we had waited so long to break down would not be restored. We would each take away from this experience the knowledge of what it's like to break down a cultural obstacle and achieve a bond, a friendship, that didn't seem manageable. This information we will keep with us forever. I believe that having this experience will allow me to better understand how to eliminate cultural barriers that stand in my way. If I am chosen for this amazing opportunity to travel to Europe in the summer of 2009, I will share my knowledge with my peers to not accept a cultural barrier, but to concentrate on destroying it and replacing the barrier with friendship.