

# PERSONAL STATEMENT

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There I was, the lone American sitting on the stage of a Moldovan talk show, getting ready to field questions from a live studio audience. I was a Peace Corps Volunteer in the former Soviet republic of Moldova, but in that moment, under the hot stage lights, I was commenting on what it meant to be an American living abroad. One by one, audience members and phone-in callers asked me about my experience. “What are your impressions of our country?”, “What is your favorite Moldovan food?”, “How do you find our people?” These were all questions I was able to answer in my broken Romanian, but what happened next was a blur.

A caller dialed in from the capital and asked me to share one thing I had learned about Moldovan culture since moving there. I decided to sing part of a folk song I had learned, not really knowing what the lyrics meant. Before I knew it, there I was singing on live Moldovan national television. The audience applauded and I was feeling pretty proud, but little did I know what I had just done.

I returned to my Moldovan home, expecting to go back to life as normal. But the very next day, I went to the outdoor market and was approached by an old man who said in a gravelly Moldovan voice, “Sing the song”. Confused for a moment, I realized he must have seen the show, so I graciously, but awkwardly, sang it for him. He started to cry right in front of me, smiled, and called me “nepoata”— a powerful Romanian word indicating close family. The next day, I went to the post office and the woman behind the counter said, “Sing the song.” This went on for months—at the park, in church, near the bus stop, at work—up until the day I left Moldova a year later.

Apparently, that song wasn’t just *any* song. It was one that every Moldovan learns as a child—one that represents their culture, their history, and their collective spirit. It struck a chord with people. The fact that I had bothered to learn it at all meant that I had joined their family. I learned from Moldova that family has sometimes nothing to do with blood ties, but everything to do with reaching out to others, caring about their perspective, and wanting to understand them as people.

Entering a new school community feels very similar to immersing oneself in a new culture. First and foremost, you have to learn the “language” that is spoken by the people. You have to understand the curriculum, the financial structure, the traditions, and the enrollment trends. You must quickly take in the history, identify the key players in the school, and learn as many names as is humanly possible. Some people will have different accents, vocabulary, or expressions, and you need to not only understand these variations but know how to use this nuanced language to connect with the diverse members of the community. Finding a common language is certainly the starting point, but it is far from the ultimate goal.

To really understand a school, I believe that cultural understanding and exploration must go deeper and further to uncover what really makes a community tick. You must connect with people on a human level, validate their experiences, value their perspectives, and recognize their talents. You need to not only listen, but hear that which is unspoken. It is important to find the Moldovan folk song that represents the spirit of the place and make that song your own in order to build trust and authentic connection with the community. Finally, you need to be willing to take a few risks in the process, so that you, too, can become a member of the family.

When I visit a country for the first time, I can never replace those first days, weeks, and months of sheer wonder. As Head of School, I will immerse myself in my school's culture and energetically approach every interaction with kindness, empathy, and a commitment to learning. I believe it's critical to savor the newness of every experience and appreciate the idiosyncrasies that make a community what it is. A new head of school has a unique and singular opportunity to *hear* people with an open mind and really understand their histories, their goals, and their visions for the future. Only then can a head of school build on the strengths of a community and carry it to new heights.

I look forward to immersing myself in my new school culture and discovering the complexities and nuance of its history, traditions, and constituents. I hope to bring my sense of wonder and adventure to my new community and to celebrate all that it has to offer.