Caitlin Brodie is a graduate of Downers Grove North High School with interests including writing, reading, dance, and music. In high school, Caitlin was involved in dance and marching band. As an English major with a minor in dance, Caitlin aspires to be a novelist. Caitlin enjoyed writing “Learning to Adapt” because she liked interviewing one of her best friends and comparing her friend's story to an essay Caitlin read in class.
Learning to Adapt

Caitlin Brodie

Upon moving to a new place, the first thing you must come to terms with is the drastic change in culture that will inevitably occur. Whether you’re just going to your friend’s house, which is five minutes away, or you’re moving to a completely different country, each place has its own personality and culture. Sometimes, you find that if you act as you do in your own culture, you are doing something horribly taboo in this new, strange world you’ve been thrown into. You may accidentally offend someone or get looked at in a funny manner because you do things differently. Upon reading David R. Count’s essay, “Too Many Bananas,” which is about the time Counts spent living with the natives of a small village in Papua New Guinea, I began to wonder how a sudden change in culture can affect other people. I immediately thought of my friend Hannah Degen, who is well versed in such changes in culture and just recently began attending Syracuse University in New York. I called Hannah on Skype, a video communication program on the computer, to see how the move to Syracuse affected her. What I found was that no matter how different a culture can be, people will always find a way to adapt.

Counts begins his essay by describing an incident that occurred at the beginning of he and his family’s stay in Kandoka Village on the island of New Britain in Papua New Guinea (437). A woman had come to them carrying a watermelon on her head, and she offered it to them for the price of two shillings, which Counts agreed was fair and paid the cost (436). However, what is fair by one culture’s standards may not be fair by another’s. Almost immediately following the woman’s departure, she returned, this time following a man named Kolia, who was the leader of the village (437). According to the culture of Kandoka Village, the woman had violated a strict code of conduct by selling them that watermelon, regardless of how fair the price had seemed to Counts. In Kandoka Village, one does not buy or sell food.
One either gives or is given food as a gift because food is meant to be shared as part of social life. Counts and his family came from a culture in which money is everything and paying for something can be considered a way of building trust. In Kandoka Village, paying for food with money is strictly against the rules, especially when staying there as a guest. This was the first lesson of many that Counts and his wife and children had to learn in order to bridge the gap between their culture and the culture of the village.

Later, after learning to treat food as a gift and not as goods to be bought or sold, Counts and his family seemed to be getting along just fine in the village. Villagers would come bearing food such as sweet potatoes, papayas, a few taros, or, more often, bananas (438). In return, he and his wife would give small gifts of tobacco to the adults, chewing gum to the children, and other things they had that were in great demand in the village (438). However, they soon faced a problem. Toward the end of November, villagers were bringing more and more bananas to them, starting with hands of bananas—about six to eight bananas clustered together—and eventually bringing entire stalks (438). Clearly, this was too much for them to eat; however, the villagers brought more and more. It got to the point where the Counts family had four complete stalks hanging on their veranda with no possible way to eat them all. It wasn’t until a woman came bearing yet another stalk of bananas that Counts decided to finally say something about the issue. “You know, we really have too many bananas—we can’t use these; maybe you ought to give them to someone else…” (438). Counts’s wife explained to the woman, trying to be as polite as possible. The woman didn’t understand. They explained it several more times, trying different approaches to the subject, and finally the woman left with her bananas, although she still didn’t seem to quite understand why they would not take the bananas. Almost immediately, Kolia came to their house, asking them why they refused the bananas. Counts and his wife explained the situation to him, and Kolia ended up just as confused and bewildered as the woman had been. Both sides explained their points again and again, each trying to get the other to understand but with no luck. At last, Kolia understood. He asked them what they normally gave their guests in return for the gifts of food. “Did it ever occur to you to suppose that your visitors might be hungry?” Kolia asked (Counts 440). It was then that they began to realize what they had done wrong. Then, Kolia said, “When your guests are hungry, feed
them bananas!” (440). Through this incident, Counts learned that what is perfectly reasonable in one culture may be horribly offensive in another. If you come from a culture like the one that Counts comes from, you know that “re-gifting,” or using a gift that someone gave to you as a gift to give to someone else is a grave offense and is seen as insulting to all involved. This is vastly different from Kandoka Village, where it is seen as the norm. These subtle, or not so subtle, cultural differences can cause a lot of problems upon moving to a new place, be it a new town, a new country, or a new state.

My friend, Hannah Degen, never experienced a move quite as drastic as moving to a small village where English is rarely spoken. However, she has moved several times in her lifetime. Before I met Hannah, she lived in California until the age of five, when her family moved to Westchester, Illinois. When asked why they moved, she replied, “It was a dangerous part of town. There were robberies all the time right by us, and there was really nothing holding us to the state, and then my Dad got a job out in Illinois, so we had to drive all the way there. Worst car trip ever.” She shook her head, laughing at the memory of being cooped up in her family’s car, fighting with her older sister for several days. The Degen family only stayed in Westchester for a year or two before moving to my own hometown of Downers Grove, Illinois, when Hannah was in second grade. When you’re between five and eight years old, you don’t notice a difference in culture as acutely as an adult would, though you do notice some of the big changes. “To an extent, I did [notice the changes], but I was a pretty oblivious kid,” Hannah said with a laugh. “Mostly, I was just excited to have a big backyard like we did in Downers Grove; that was all I really cared about. I mean, I guess I mostly just noticed the difference in safety levels. Like I said, in California, we weren’t really in a good area, and then in Downers Grove, it was all nice and suburban.”

After living in Downers Grove through high school, Hannah decided that she needed a change. Her mother worked for one of the elementary schools in town, and thus knew many of the families, which can get frustrating when you’re a teenager and you know that everyone you see could potentially be a sort of spy for your mother. While most of our friends were applying to the local community college or various state schools located in Illinois, Hannah was one of the few who planned to go as far away as possible. “Well, I’ve got family out here [in New York], so I have people to connect with, and I was just really
sick of the whole suburban thing, y’know?” she said. “I wanted to be on my own, but I still wanted to be by people who I could trust. New York seemed like a logical place to go.” It wasn’t until Hannah took sociology her second semester of senior year that she began to worry about how different it was going to be in the fall when she moved.

But you can never really fully prepare yourself for the changes to come. No matter how much you think you know, there will always be something you don’t know and then have to come to terms with. Counts was forced to rethink the rules on gifts and sharing, which were an important part of the Kandoka village culture. For Hannah, she needed to figure out how to make friends all over again. She told me: “Well, at Downers Grove North High School, we had such a tight-knit community. I knew so many people at that school, and every day I saw you, or Nella, or Margaux, or any of our other friends, and I wasn’t afraid to goof around or act like a complete idiot. Out here, at Syracuse, I don’t know anyone that well, and I feel like an idiot whenever I act how I used to back home.” Making friends in college is difficult enough as it is without adding in the effect of being so far away from home. It’s difficult to picture the Hannah Degen I know having a hard time making friends, with her bubbly personality and caring nature. Once you get to college, though, everything you thought you knew has a way of buckling under you and collapsing. Either you let culture shock drag you down by not conforming to the changes around you, or you can embrace it.

Just like Counts found a way to cope with the new society he lived in, Hannah has found a way to cope as well. She has befriended almost everyone on her floor and is thoroughly enjoying college life. She gets into disputes now and then and has to work a little harder to adapt to this new culture, but she adapts quickly. She has become fast friends with her roommate and is slowly starting to build a new circle of friends. When asked about major cultural differences, Hannah had only one major complaint: “I’m one of the only people here who’s from Illinois, so people always think I have some sort of weird accent, or they just look at me funny whenever I say something I’m so used to saying back home.” Despite the mild language barrier, Hannah is adjusting well to her new friends and surroundings.

The bottom line is that we all come from different cultures, different backgrounds and families and places that all have a different set of rules, but somehow we manage to work with these differences.
Whether you are moving away to college in a state far, far away, or living with a group of people completely alien to yourself, you will always learn how to cope and eventually, you will learn how to live as a functioning member of that society. Each culture has so much to teach you if only you allow yourself to learn. Hannah Degen’s new friends in New York are teaching her how to socialize and make friends in their new culture just as Counts’s neighbors in the village of Kandoka in Papau New Guinea taught him and his family the rules of socialization in that village. No matter how different or strange a society may seem, each one has valuable lessons to teach. All you have to do is give yourself the chance to learn them.

Instructor Nyssa Bulkes's comments: Caitlin's ideas throughout "Learning to Adapt" are both clear and concise, and she represents her friend's point of view both articulately and intimately. Her ability to treat the interview as an actual source for a piece of writing is a valuable skill she demonstrated with this essay.