

## THINKING OUTSIDE THE BOX FOR A FIRST GENERATION AMERICAN

By Sofiia Minasian – October 23th, 2019

When I first saw the name of Alexey Stern, an American student I was going to write about, I just thought : “Alexey? Is he Russian?” The first thing I heard when I spoke to him was: “Привет! Как дела?” (Rus. “Hi! How are you?”)

Alexey, who is doing his undergraduate degree in Corporate Communication at Penn State University, is a first-generation American. He is the child of immigrants from the USSR. His father taught English for Russian immigrants in the US. That is how he met Alexey’s mother. Since childhood Alexey has been listening to the stories his parents told him about their country. He understands Russian and can speak it a little. He appreciates Russian culture. However he has never been to Russia. But if you ask me if he feels more Russian or American, I will answer: both... Grown and educated within the American culture, he knows that he is American. An American who never forgets how the Russian heritage impacted on his perception as an American:



“I always have a more worldwide view when I hear about politics...It makes me much more understanding about immigrants, their stories, problems...”

And it is not just about global questions, but everyday life too. For Alexey, being independent is above all things. But thinking independently is not always easy in the educational system. In high-school it was usual for Alexey to hear teachers asking him to do what everybody did. But he always refused this standardization, and preferred instead to think outside the box. When almost all students chose volunteer work for their graduate project, he chose to work on an introspective poetry collection. He had to listen to the other students and teacher saying “It is not a real project”. Even under pressure he didn’t listen to anybody, and instead stayed focused on his own goal. He proved his right to go his own way.

Nowadays, everything has changed. His university campus is his big family. Professors know students, students know each other and often have fun together. Some professors are even Alexey’s friends on Facebook. Alexey simply says that this is America and if you want to make a lot of friends, you can. It works the other way too. It is necessary to make an effort to get what you want.



With the Pennsylvania News Media Association Award for package of stories “Shattered by violence”

His everyday life proves it. Every morning when he wakes up he checks email for his current internship and for college. After that he goes to university. There he is everywhere... As newspaper editor, writing stories and helping younger students? Sounds good for him. As marketing assistant to one of the professors as a part-time job? He is always there. And without forgetting his activities as a

student in an honors art and biology hybrid class: "I am bad at drawing and that is great, it is fun to go out of my comfort zone." You may say that he wants to be omnipresent. Maybe you are right... Alexey knows that being first-generation American makes him more ambitious, try harder and want more for himself than other Americans.

As far back as he can remember, he has been mad about writing, reading and languages. As a child, he wanted to become a famous published author. Dostoevsky, one of his favorite authors, influenced his wish to write. But he grew up and understood that there are dreams and then there is the real world. He came to communication classes with the practical idea to apply his linguistic skills. This approach is not traditional for American students. Alexey adapted his dreams to real life. He qualifies himself as a practical person. I would qualify him as an everyday dreamer.

As part of his vision for his life, Alexey wants to have a job to apply his communication skills. At the same time he never forgets about his dream to become a famous published writer. He is smiling as he jokingly says: "Maybe in 40 years, but it will be a good book."

Alexey's story became significant for me. Before our meeting I have never thought that in some way I am first-generation Russian. My parents met in Russia, but both were born in Azerbaijan. In some way I understand Alexey's mindset. He didn't tell me about some melodramatic or shocking experience of his life. He told me much more. I did not see a first-generation citizen looking for his identity or trying to choose between two cultures. I saw a smart young man taking the best of his heritage and his present and making his own intercultural path.