Home is in Your Head

If you had the opportunity, would you pack your bags and leave for a foreign country at a moment’s notice?

As the son of military personnel, I qualified as a “military kid,” or child of an active-duty military employee. My family moved across the globe every two or three years, which meant that we had to adapt to different climates, new groups of friends, and foreign cultures. When you’re a military kid, home is where the navy sends you, and for every touchdown, a lift-off awaits around the corner.

European Vacation

My family moved to Gaeta, Italy, in 1983, when I was six years old, just one month before I began first grade. Gaeta is located between Rome and Naples in the southern region of Italy.

I attended Joshua Barney Elementary, which was a Department of Defense school for the children of military employees. My friends consisted of Italian neighbors who spoke little or no English and my American classmates who spoke little or no Italian. Still, we had a lot of fun together. We attended field trips to Rome and Pisa, where we could inspect Michelangelo’s Sistine Chapel ceiling up close, or scale the Leaning Tower’s floors, all in the name of education.

Although my school was basically the same as any American elementary school, I had different after-school activities than my friends in America. We liked to hang out in the ruins of a 200-year old abbey. Bombs had nearly destroyed the abbey during World War II. My friends and I uncovered frescoes and wall paintings that had lain buried beneath the rubble for dozens of years. I felt like I was digging into history even when I was wasting time with my friends!

Next Stop: Florida!

After four years in Italy, my father was assigned to a base in Jacksonville, Florida. Returning to America (or the States, as we called it) sent me into culture shock. In America, I could understand every conversation I heard in the supermarket, every store accepted American dollars, and all television was in English! Also, many of my new friends in Florida were military kids themselves, so we already had a lot in common. They were familiar with living a life “on the move” and many of them had recently moved to Florida, just like me.
On an average day, few people can do as much to cure a child’s suffering as neurosurgeon Dr. Alexa Canady. And few people give up as much to do so. The average neurosurgeon spends 12 to 14 hours a day performing difficult surgery. How difficult is that surgery? Imagine using tweezers to thread a needle while at the bottom of the ocean surrounded by sharks. Neurosurgery on children is even more difficult.

In an average week, Canady might remove a tumor from a child’s brain or spine, end a child’s seizures, or relieve the buildup of spinal fluid that can cause death in young children.

“I think [my patients] view life on a day-by-day basis,” she says. “They’re not worried about what’s going to happen next week or next month. It’s what’s going to happen five minutes from now. That lets them live in the moment.”

Canady has been touching the lives of children and their families for more than 30 years. Canady not only operates on children: she comforts, reassures, and nurtures them. Parents bring their children hundreds of miles to receive Canady’s expert care. The world-renowned doctor’s achievements have also inspired numerous young people to take up careers in medicine.

Canady’s drive and discipline are the result of years of effort and commitment.

Born in 1950, Alexa Canady grew up in Lansing, Michigan. As a young girl, she wanted to be a mathematician. Pursuing a college education was something her parents and grandmother had also done. However, when Canady attended the University of Michigan, she found out that she no longer felt any passion for mathematics. Canady started skipping classes. Her grades slipped.

“I had trouble because I didn’t know what I wanted to do,” she says. “I had lost mathematics as a dream.”

That summer, Canady’s brother suggested she apply for a minority medical school scholarship at the university. As soon as Canady began to study medicine, she discovered her true passion. She would eventually graduate with honors from the University of Michigan.