

## An Intern's Journey from Iran to the U.S.

As Rumi, a famous Persian poet said, "As you start to walk on the way, the way appears." My journey from Shiraz, Iran to the US began when I embarked on a plane to New York Friday, March 1, 2013 at 2:00 AM. I was both nervous about the uncertainties ahead and excited for the future. The decision to study in the US is one I have no regrets about. My name is Ali Razmpa, and I had the opportunity to intern at KAI's Portland office while finishing the master's program in transportation engineering at Portland State University.

After earning my undergraduate degree in civil engineering, I worked as project engineer and managed the construction process of several private development projects in Shiraz, Iran. Shiraz is famous for its historical places, poets, roses, and wine. Real estate and building construction are major sources of business, and the city was growing rapidly with new construction at the time. While the job demanded a lot of hard work, and strong management and communication skills, I felt it did not require much technical expertise. In 2011, international sanctions due to Iran's nuclear program began and Iran's currency lost about 80% of its value against US dollar in the span of two years. This caused a huge impact on almost all businesses, particularly construction. My desire for professional development, in addition to the many changes in the economic situation encouraged me to pursue my graduate education abroad.

I decided to pursue my master's degree in the United States as American universities are well known for providing strong educational programs, opportunities to work with faculty on exclusive research projects, and the skills needed to compete in the job market. I originally thought it would be preferable to live and study in a location in which I would have family nearby. I began looking at universities in the Pacific Northwest as I have some extended family in Vancouver, BC. The beautiful natural setting of surrounding areas, the campus location in downtown, diversity of people in ethnicity and background, and relatively reasonable cost of living/education all made Portland State University a very desirable option. I was drawn to transportation engineering and planning as the university has a very strong program, and the city is well known for its diverse transportation system and innovative approach to planning.

Experiencing American culture has been an adventure. Upon moving here, I discovered a whole new sphere of outdoor recreation including hiking, biking, camping, rafting, and paddle boarding. In

Shiraz, most weekends are spent relaxing with friends and family at someone's summerhouse or having late-night gatherings. Visiting the homes of extended family members is a regular pastime and hanging out with friends occurs at restaurants and cafes, as opposed to bars and pubs. When I began my program at PSU, I had concerns about my ability to communicate. In fact, my first term, I had many memorable moments with drawing pictures and funny miscommunications. Some cultural differences took me by surprise as well. I learned that professors and students are not formal with one another, there's no afternoon siesta, it isn't necessary to dress up for class, and everyone uses email instead of phone calls or waiting to speak face-to-face. Also, individual work is more recognized and effort is much appreciated. It was great to connect over a mutual love of Ping-Pong, along with my many newfound interests, and I found that this truly enriched my experience. Ultimately, I learned that with a willingness to learn and a good sense of humor, challenges are great opportunities for growth.

In my academic career, I appreciate that the PSU transportation program exposes students to the newest research so their knowledge is up to date. In one case, I assisted my advisor in a research project and he used results of the research in his course the next quarter. The insights and support of the faculty members strengthened my confidence and furthered my professional development and academic success. Nearing the end of my program, I wanted an opportunity to get hands-on experience and KAI gave me that opportunity through its summer internship program. It was a great to be able to work with different project managers, and the trust and support of the staff created a fantastic environment in which to excel. Flexibility in time management, high quality of projects, and access to different types of work were other privileges of interning at KAI. Having previous experience in management, I am extremely appreciative of the positive atmosphere, collaboration, and professionalism I experienced at KAI. The firm cares a great deal about the connection between staff members, both within individual offices and across the country. This was extended to the Intern Jamboree, which allowed all of the interns to gather in Portland, explore the city, and interact with one another. KAI's internship expanded my knowledge and skill set, gave me a great appreciation for the power of work environment, and solidified my desire to pursue a career in transportation engineering. It's been an exciting few years, and I am truly thankful for the opportunities I've been given and the support of numerous individuals along the way. Now, I look forward to contributing to the field professionally.