

I was born in a country that sings through joy and rain.
Every note taught me that people find each other in sound.
I crossed oceans with that rhythm still in me,
to learn new chords,
to blend differences into harmony,
and to turn every place I go
into part of one unfolding symphony.

Growing up in Vietnam, I did not just hear music—I lived inside it. It is the pulse of daily life that spills out of open windows, follows the rhythm of motorbikes weaving through traffic, and hums softly in family kitchens. Vietnamese people love karaoke, not as performance, but as belonging. At birthdays, weddings, or reunions, strangers become friends the moment the microphone passes around. Everyone takes turns, laughs, and cheers for one another. It's a joyful chaos that brings everyone closer, sometimes so close that the neighbors have to yell, “Please turn it down!”. But music isn't only joy; it carries the full range of emotions, sorrow, nostalgia, and healing. Growing up in that culture taught me to listen, to rhythm, to tone, to the unspoken feelings between lines of a song. I learned that the most meaningful connections often come from paying attention to what's beyond words. That foundation became my bridge when I moved to the U.S. I carried the rhythms of home with me like a quiet confidence, ready to discover what new harmonies I could build in a different world. Music made the unfamiliar feel like an invitation rather than a challenge.

In the U.S., I discovered that music could build bridges not just across countries, but across differences. Volunteering with AIM Seattle, an organization that empowers people with disabilities through adaptive dance and music, opened my eyes to its quiet strength as a universal language. I was paired one-on-one with a teen who had cerebral palsy and communicated nonverbally. At first, she rarely responded to people or activities—her gaze wandered, her hands restless—but when the familiar tune of “*The Wheels on the Bus*” began to play, something miraculous happened. Her eyes lit up. She giggled, smiled, and swayed gently to the rhythm, as if the music awakened a hidden part of her that words could never reach. We built entire conversations out of rests and echoes. Each week, she grew bolder; the day she initiated the pattern herself, I wrote in my notebook: *Today she spoke first, without words.* In that moment, I understood that music can transcend barriers that speech or

logic cannot. Those sessions didn't just teach me about inclusion, they redefined what leadership and belonging mean to me.

As I learned to listen with my whole body, service started to look less like helping and more like co-creating. I asked myself: *What does inclusion sound like?* Sometimes it sounded like replacing lyrics with vowel sounds so everyone could sing; sometimes it sounded like leaving space for silence between verses so the room could reset. Leadership, I discovered, often begins with small gestures like adjusting a chair, lowering the volume, matching someone's pace. Music taught me a simple method I carry everywhere: start with a beat anyone can join, notice the spark that makes someone light up, echo it back louder, celebrate the shared rhythm, and then leave space for the next voice to enter. These moments reshaped my sense of belonging in the U.S. I arrived thinking I needed perfect English to connect, but rhythm turned out to be the better translator. Music became my teacher and my mirror, it showed me the kind of person I want to be: someone who notices the quiet cues, who can translate care into structure, who can make a room feel possible.

Over time, I have realized that life isn't a solo performance, it's a symphony. Each person we meet plays a different instrument, carries a distinct rhythm, and joins for a measure or two before the song changes. It's the contrast of the friction of sounds that shouldn't fit but somehow do that creates beauty. My younger self wanted to lead, to be heard, to make the melody clear. But living between cultures taught me that true connection isn't about being louder but listening deeply enough to understand someone else's rhythm. That's how I've learned to see people, to not as notes to be corrected, but as tones to be balanced. We orchestrated our differences in the way artists turn pain into color and poets turn silence into verse, transforming what could have separated us into something beautiful.

Music continues to shape how I dream and how I lead. I want to carry this sense of harmony into every space I enter, whether a classroom, workplace, or community, so that differences don't divide but compose something larger together. My growth began with the songs of my childhood and deepened with the rhythms I've shared here. I may never be the loudest voice in life's orchestra, but I hope to be the one who keeps the beat steady so others can join in—because the world, like music, sounds fullest when every voice is heard. And when I think of the girl from AIM Seattle tapping my nose to the rhythm of her favorite song, I realize: maybe that's all harmony really is—people listening closely enough to move together, even if they've never spoken the same language.