

“Let’s think of a group name and motto. You have any suggestions?” I asked, looking intently at the young first formers’ faces around me. Their faces portrayed a myriad of emotions, from eager and happy to sad and lonesome.

It was the start of a new term, and as usual, first formers will have to go through orientation week. I volunteered as a facilitator to help them adapt to the boarding school. While looking at them, I reminisced how I was when I entered this school.

When I was small, my eyes were squinted. People always stared and teased me. Wherever I went, I tried to hide and hope that nobody will notice me. Although I had an operation to improve the squint, I still felt inferior to those around me. In the midst of my insecurities, my father announced that he was going to send me away to a boarding secondary school 600km away.

“Life is a struggle, it is never easy,” a teacher patted my back, seeing my troubled face during the registration day. I felt my life was being shredded into pieces. I was suddenly thrown into a noisy crowd of teenagers, and I don’t know even one of them. That evening, when my father went home (when I ran out of excuses to prevent him from leaving), I realized that I had nobody who can understand me. I was alone.

The first week was dreadful. I cried almost every minute I was alone. Each morning, when I woke up and realized where I was, a deep, sorrowful feeling crept in my heart. I felt that everything about the school was dreadful. The food was horrible, the heat was unbearable, and even the washrooms were awful. Everything seemed strange and uncomfortable. Sometimes, a thought of running away to return home sneaked in my mind.

Surprisingly, I found strength in myself that I never thought I have – perseverance. When I felt like giving up, I will look at my friends and tell myself “If they can, why can’t I?” I vowed to give my best to adapt. How can I not try when my friends and seniors relentlessly supported me? They woke me up each morning, ate together with me, and eagerly tried to cheer me up. Gradually, the sorrow I felt receded. The feelings that made me distant and aloof transformed into a sense of belonging and warmth.

Looking at myself now, I feel glad that I never gave up during that first few months. At that time, I would prefer the comfort I would have if I stayed at home, but “a ship is safe in its harbor, but that is not what it’s built for.” Now I understand that changes are painful, but going through it will help us become a better person.

“Is this flag okay?” a first former asked me, showing a flag he had drawn.

“It’s wonderful!” I exclaimed, smiling. Now it is my turn to help them.