[00:00:04]

[MUSIC] You are listening to Tell Me Your Story, where we connect to HLS's staff on a personal level. Hello everyone. This is Edgar Kley Filho from HLS Human Resources Department. My pronouns are he, him, his. Today, we are talking to Lilit Azizyan from ITS who will tell us about her life, how long she is in this position at HLS and the work she does. Thank you for joining us Lilit, and please tell me your story.

[00:00:39]

Hi, my friends. Thank you so much for having me.

[00:00:42]

You're welcome. I am so happy that you are here. First, tell me your full name the way that you pronounce it and your position at ITS, if it is just ITS or there is a sub department.

[00:00:55]

Sure. My pronunciation of my name is Lilit Azizyan, and I work in ITS at their business solutions team and I'm a Senior Business Systems Analyst.

[00:01:10]

Let me go back a little bit. Because you usually say Lilit. It's not Lilit is Lilit.

[00:01:17]

Well, the English pronunciation, yeah, Lilit. But the Armenian pronunciation will be Lilit.

[00:01:26]

Lilit. Which sounds very much into a Portuguese. That's why you would pronounce that.

[00:01:30]

Lilit.

[00:01:30]

Yeah, it would be Lilit Azizyan.

[00:01:32]

Yes.

[00:01:33]

Interesting. But your preference?

[00:01:35]

Either one.

[00:01:36]

Either one?

[00:01:37]

Yes.

[00:01:37]

Good. That's good to know. Tell us a little bit more about your family history.

[00:01:45]

Sure. I was actually born and raised in Armenia, so across the world. [LAUGHTER]

[00:01:53]

A little bit far from New England.

[00:01:55]

A little bit far from New England. I spent my childhood in Armenia. My family, both of my parents were born there. My grandparents were born there. My grandparents grandparents were actually survivals of the Armenian Genocide, so they escape the killings in 1915. Then when they settled from Western Armenia, when they escape they then came to Eastern Armenia, they settled there. On both of my grandparents side, grandma, both of them were basically from different cities. They survive [OVERLAPPING]

[00:02:35]

For how long you lived in Armenia? You said that you spent your childhood there, for how many years?

[00:02:42]

I spent all my teenage years there, so I moved here around high school age. When my family decided to move here for a better schooling and better opportunity, and so I grew up there. I went to school there.

[00:03:01]

How was the school there?.

[00:03:04]

Very different. The systems are very different. The teaching methodologies are different, the grading systems are different. The country, when I grew up, it was, obviously the Soviet has already collapsed, but previous to that it was under the Soviet Union, so a lot of the governmental system, educational systems, they were set by the Soviets at the time in the '80s. Like you could still feel the effects of that post Soviet era. There were a lot of similarities in many countries who are part of the Soviet Union because they [OVERLAPPING]

[00:03:54]

That was their controlling.

[00:03:55]

The grading system, and so we had to learn Russian in school because it was like a second language, and they has transition a lot. I haven't been back to school since I moved here. But when I talk to my nephews and my nieces back home, there are a lot more Westernized per se. The school systems have changed a little bit, grading have changed a little bit. They moved from a 10-year school model to a 12-year model, which is more like the US system.

[00:04:27]

Oh, wow.

[00:04:29]

But it is very different.

[00:04:33]

I imagine. Could you ask it, you're coming from your great great grandparents. They would speak a different language before the Soviet Union or this too was-

[00:04:44]

They will still speaker Armenian. Everybody speaks Armenian.

[00:04:47]

But you said that you learned Russian?

[00:04:50]

In school.

[00:04:50]

At school.

[00:04:50]

It would be like a second language.

[00:04:52]

It was Armenian as your primary language and then Russian as your second language and then you also had a choice of selecting some other languages if you wanted to, so like German, French, depending on what the school offered as an elective course.

[00:05:09]

You are fluent in both in Armenian and Russian?

[00:05:11]

I wouldn't call myself fluent in Russian but I would say I'm definitely proficient.

[00:05:17]

But in Armenian you are?

[00:05:19]

I am. Yes.

[00:05:20]

Wow. You also learn some German or-

[00:05:24]

German, I know I picked it up here actually after college, but if you wanted to, that was an option to also take any other courses. But the primary one was Armenian and then you would required to also take Russian at the time.

[00:05:40]

Curiosity.

[00:05:41]

This is like 1990s.

[00:05:43]

Russian, Armenian. Until up to almost high-school you lived there?

[00:05:49]

Yes.

[00:05:49]

How was the transition to US, language-wise that were based in English before or you just came here and you start from zero?

[00:06:00]

Sure. Close to zero in the language. I did learn Armenian and Russia in preschool and up until middle school, which they have different names there. We only had one school at the time. There was no like preschool, middle school, high school, it's all one system. But yes, I took English there. I can't remember how many years. Basically when I moved here, I tested into ESL 1, so I knew the alphabet, but it was [OVERLAPPING]

[00:06:32]

I think is the same about in Latin America. We learn English as an option there, like a second language or something.

[00:06:39]

In Brazil?

[00:06:39]

In Brazil as well. But whatever I learned from, I don't know, fourth grade or fifth grade, all the way to nine grades or even 12 to the end of high school, but made no difference.

[00:06:57]

What I find about languages and I find that interesting and it's probably me. But I don't know if anybody else will just stop or resonate with them is that it's one thing to learn it and it's one thing to actually practice and live in a culture. I think because I lived in back home. We had Armenian as our primary language. Obviously that was not an issue. But a lot of the media was still really listened to Russian TV or the translations of a lot of movies or programs will still be in Russian. It was very easy for you to observe and learn the language versus English where there wasn't a lot of exposure, so you only have like one hour in school, you come do your homework and then-

[00:07:48]

That's it, right?

[00:07:49]

Yes.

[00:07:51]

In any language, I find that if you don't use it and if you don't live in that environment where people speak the language or in the culture, so you actually hear it, and then you are forced to speak sometimes, is when you're really learning and you're really grasping the language.

[00:08:15]

I agree with you.

[00:08:15]

So it doesn't matter how many years did is, I think it's a much faster transition and a better learning experience when you're immersed in the culture.

[00:08:24]

That's what I felt here. My decision, I'm glad that I took that decision on my own, was I want to get away from my Brazilian community as much as I could to be immersed with the English so I could learn faster. When I was working with landscape learning, I would try to be closer to the American folks working there because I want to pick up on whatever. Even watching TV I started with the subtitles to be able to have some sense of what's going on. But then later I gave up just to force myself. I know for a fact that there are two or three other Brazilians folks working with me at the time. But they didn't want to do the same process. They want to stay with the community and go out at night or on weekends and that kind of a thing. The English for them was much more difficult and delayed a lot. That shows the impact of being immersed in the culture, even being here. If you remain too close to your community and watch the channels or whatever it is, right?

[00:09:34]

Definitely. You can actually observe that if you go into different. Also for first day Armenians who live together, it gives you a sense of security, because then you can speak with people, you can go grocery shopping, people will help you to fill up different forums where you don't know how to fill out any forums or you can read all the nuances, but it's a double-edged sword because then you're never learning. I'll tell you a funny story about making yourself uncomfortable and being in a position where you don't understand for the purpose of learning or being forced to speak. When I moved here and I started high school during my summer term, I believe it was summer term, but my ESL counselor for me to work in the counseling office, at that time, I've finished the first level of ESL, it's been so long ago. [LAUGHTER] Don't call me on the years, but I think I finished ESL 1 at that point, but she wanted me to volunteer there, just so I could speak to people. But, I went to a Hispanic school. Some 90 something percent of the parents or the student body, or the parents, when they would come to the office, they would try to speak to you in Spanish and I was trying to learn English. [LAUGHTER] And then I would answer their phone call because we had so many people calling and they didn't speak English either because they have just also immigrated from another country that their primary language is Spanish, so there would call you and then speak in Spanish. I didn't know how to respond. I'm trying to learn English and then now there's Spanish. My supervisor wrote on a little paper, a little cheat sheet for me, so that when people called and they didn't speak English, I could at least say something before I transfer them to her, and she did speak Spanish. She wrote me a little note on the sticky note and I think what it said it was [FOREIGN]. I'm sorry, I don't speak Spanish, please wait a minute and I will transfer your call, and I mastered that [LAUGHTER]. So every time somebody calls I'm like, [FOREIGN]. I got it down, it was perfect. Except that if you don't speak Spanish, you shouldn't be able to say that. Then one angry [inaudible 00:12:27] called, and I answered the call and I said the same thing, and I transferred it to my supervisor. A few minutes later she came in, she said to me, well, just don't say that again because she thought that you actually spoke Spanish and didn't want to help her, [LAUGHTER] because your Spanish was so much better than your English.

[00:12:46]

Yeah, it is a good Spanish there, I can see it.

[00:12:50]

There you go. You're trying to learn something and you're in this position where you don't understand either English or you don't understand Spanish. I had a lot of funny moments later.

[00:13:06]

It's confusing and sometimes that happens.

[00:13:09]

Sometimes that happens with the words and pronunciation.

[00:13:12]

Pronunciation.

[00:13:13]

Then learning idioms. It was a journey.

[00:13:17]

I am here for 20 years. I still have problem with certain words that Brian's family, when they bend their head to the side a little bit and look at me like, what did you say? I know that there is a misunderstanding there. Brian already because we live together, he knows what I'm saying because he got used with my accent.

[00:13:39]

Of course.

[00:13:39]

He's the one that finally turn, now he said that, he didn't say that. I could give an example of a few of them. If you are going to swim on the beach, that's the one word that took a while for them to get used to this, or if you go to bed, you cover yourself with one of the sheets and the other one would be, or sheep, or a sheep as the animal and the boat that's always there. There are quite a few of them that goes what? That's not part of this conversation. There is always that confusion, we always laugh. I laugh about this whole situation because I can see the confusion there. Did you mean this or that and say, okay, there you go, Now you're teasing. Anyways, another thing coming from a completely different culture with the education system based on Soviet Union, how was learning high-school? How was the interaction here? How was everything? How did you perceive the change in how the interaction happens?

[00:14:55]

Definitely not easy.

[00:14:56]

I imagined really.

[00:14:59]

I started with the ESL class English as a second language. But a lot of the people, majority of the students there were Hispanic, so everyone spoke Spanish. Like if they didn't understand something you had some friend or someone that they can rely on to translate for them. Where in my case I didn't have anybody else who spoke Armenian in most of my classes.

[00:15:27]

Yeah.

[00:15:30]

I have a lot of stories. [LAUGHTER] By nature, I just have that nature where if it doesn't, then I'll just figure out way for every situation to handle it. But I remember, so I'll tell you this little funny story, they wouldn't allow me for example, to bring in a dictionary, well if you don't speak English, how's an English dictionary going to help you? I would go to class, I bring my book and then the English dictionary with me. After a few days, I had one of my teachers. I asked them if I could bring in my Armenian dictionary and he said yes that will make more sense [LAUGHTER]. Then there was my book and then the English dictionary and the Armenian dictionary. Thanks to that teacher. I started thinking about that it would make a lot more sense for me.

[00:16:32]

I don't need to see the names. I need meaning.

[00:16:35]

I can't read this English dictionary. Some of my teachers will give me extra assignments. I remember Mrs. Womack. She wasn't an English teacher and she would ask me to read a puzzle, the same paragraph that she will give to the class she would ask me to read it too because let me tell you, I was in ESL and then they put me in ESL and regular English at the same time. For sure that just happened. [LAUGHTER] The ESL classes were meant for students who were learning English but regular English classes, you don't speak English? It was a little bit harder. I would do a lot of translations and so Mrs. Womack will allow me to read the same texts and instead of writing an essay, she would let me create this matrix of the words that I didn't know and then do an adjective for that word do a synonym for that word. To draw it, whatever the verb is like to eat or to, she would help me to learn the words or learn vocabulary.

[00:17:46]

Which is very important.

[00:17:48]

Very important. Then she would let me look it up in my Armenian dictionary. She would let me draw it out for like, for you to remember it.

[00:17:57]

Visually is important.

[00:17:59]

There were different techniques at different times that we did during my ESL program when I was in high school. I'm trying to remember what was it we do. We do the extra assignments and I have my first, I remember my first essay in English was to read Jurassic Park and write an essay but it end up was very hard to read for an ESL student. I remember translating word to word Jurassic Park. [LAUGHTER] Thankfully, I watched the movies I knew what was happening and I kept misspelling island. [LAUGHTER] My teacher would keep corrected and I would miss out s because it's silent. I was like is it island? They are like no it's pronounced island and there would be like red marks. I never forget how to spell island anymore because there was always crossed in my essays that I would miss the s. [LAUGHTER]

[00:19:00]

It's not easy. I think people don't realize how much effort is put into and you have a really, I think we come with a resilience of some sort or whatever could frustrate someone and make someone to give up. It's almost a no option there. You have to keep going because the end goal is to learn. It's almost that it doesn't bother me if I made this mistake few times or like you said some x's there that now I know how to spell island with the right way because we need to do. But then you said that you were first doing ESL. But parallel with that, would take the other classes as well? Math, History, Geography, and everything else? Yes. When we're tested, they gave me two tests. One was English test which I didn't do too well on and the other one Math tests, so my Maths test was much higher.

You like Math?

[00:20:10]

No, because English I never learned, but math it was like a different level I was at a much higher level than English which I never learned. I don't know why that decision was made I don't remember, but I would do and I started mid-semester. Just happened to be because when I moved here, it was not at the beginning of the term. I did a few months of ESL and then I was doing ESL and then regular courses, but few months like two three months I think it's not enough for you to learn the language. A lot of the time I would translate a lot of my assignments, my homeworks. But it worked out well.

[00:20:57]

By the end of the high-school, you felt like the improvement was much higher than when you started. You noticed the change?

[00:21:05]

I graduated high school in my junior year.

[00:21:08]

Really?

[00:21:09]

Including all my ESL courses. I would say yes because, I was at a place where I felt like this is not me because coming from home, I had good grades. I straight A's. Then when I came, all of a sudden you get bad grade.

[00:21:31]

Push you to try.

[00:21:34]

Like, oh my God, I can't believe, I've never gotten a bad grade in my life. [LAUGHTER] It makes you want to work more to go back up to the level where you were.

[00:21:45]

To get to the level of the students or even surpass them.

[00:21:51]

I remember at one point sitting down and say, okay, I need to graduate high school. I need to figure out how I'm going to do this. I think I created on the paper my graduation plan. Speaking of differences in the system. I had no idea there was a person, a counselor that you can go to who will do this for you so I sat at home by myself doing this. I'm like, okay, let me do this.

[00:22:21]

Which is not common, I think it seems like, well, not common where you came from, and not very common way we came from as well, at least at my time.

[00:22:29]

Definitely there's no such thing as a counselor. It's a different set up. You don't have somebody sitting, well first of all, you wouldn't necessarily be selecting your courses like this or something like that, it will be set up for you. A lot of the system changes. It's interesting when I reflect back. Because having lived here for a long time, as an adult I can see it from a different perspective versus what I was doing when I was a teenager. But I do remember sitting down there and I was like, okay, well I got to do this classes and I got to take this many courses in government and as many in English and I planned it out. [LAUGHTER].

[00:23:13]

I would never think of that Lilit.

[00:23:18]

Never. [LAUGHTER]

[00:23:20]

I planted out and somebody told me that he can also go to a community college and take courses there. I was like, okay, if I take more courses, I would get better. My English will get better sooner. I was doing high school. I think that was sophomore here. I was going to high school and then come home like around 2-3 o'clock, and then I will go back to college to take courses at night, the 6:45-9:00, so I will take courses. Then I found out that if I take courses at a community college, they actually transfer back into high school because it's a college level course, and you fulfills a requirement for English or depending on which course economy or in the night. I started concurrently taking high school courses and college courses, and I made my spreadsheet.

[00:24:18]

Was that your first spreadsheet, Lilit?

[00:24:20]

It was, but it was not on my Excel. It was on a paper.

[00:24:23]

[LAUGHTER] It was a planner.

[00:24:25]

I don't remember the exact way of doing, I know it was on a paper because I didn't have a computer.

[00:24:32]

I think we need to give some people a little bit of background here why you were joking about planning and why you like your planning. Lilit is working with accessibility services group in HR to implement what we call accommodate a new software to help.

[00:24:54]

A case management system.

[00:24:56]

Yes, case management system, to help with all the accommodations and communications between system in our office with different offices, Registrar’s and everything else. Lilit is what we call your position there when you are doing the Master?

[00:25:13]

Scrum Master.

[00:25:14]

Scrum master, yes. For our group and comes with all the spreadsheet, planning and scheduling, and everything else. It's on my ask to really trying to figure it out. I just wanted to give that background because that's the reference for her first planning or the planner or not a spreadsheet [OVERLAPPING]

[00:25:35]

On the paper.

[00:25:36]

In Excel. I think people should know exactly what it is that you joke about here.

[00:25:42]

Definitely. But I think it all come down to looking up requirements from what is transferable course at a community college.

[00:25:50]

All that on your own.

[00:25:52]

Yeah. Because I didn't know that there was a counselor who would actually do that for you and they had all these tools available. I made that and then I find out there is a counselor, I go to Mrs. Lisa, she was the only person that I knew as a counselor and she was the SL counselor. But I know there was also a college counselor who helps people with SATs, who gives college advise and everything else that she did. I had no idea. I go to my Mrs. Lisa, I show her my plan because I needed her approval, you can't really graduate.

[00:26:34]

Big plans, you didn't even know if it was going to work for your future or not.

[00:26:38]

But it worked out in a way that when I went to university, I already had all these college courses that transfer then, so I saved a lot of money on tuition.

[00:26:50]

That was smart.

[00:26:53]

Saving money part wasn't a part of my plan that happened too later.

[00:26:57]

Yes, but even transferring all the credit.

[00:26:59]

But credits were because they had another paper sheet that tells you, if you take this course, it will transfer into a UC system, which is University of California system. This colleges and if you take that course, it will transfer it as this course, so I got a lot of general A requirements done during that time and at the time I thought it was just like, I didn't understand how it would impact college application and having done so many general courses cut down, almost close to a year of college.

[00:27:45]

With everything that you had done before.

[00:27:47]

Right.

[00:27:47]

That's fantastic.

[00:27:48]

Because it got transferred in and that translated into savings on tuition for that.

[00:27:56]

Wow. Almost a year. That's a lot of credit.

[00:28:01]

I will give or take, depending on other course.

[00:28:03]

That's wonderful. You are doing all this learning your English at the same time that you go back home and help your family?

[00:28:13]

I would say so. My family moved here before I did.

[00:28:19]

Another thing, sorry. The questions keeps popping up. Moved where? Because I'm assuming New England?

[00:28:26]

I mean here to Los Angeles.

[00:28:27]

Los Angeles. That's where you went to. The neighborhood where you lived was common to Armenian or other folks?

[00:28:35]

Yes.

[00:28:36]

Oh, great.

[00:28:37]

That's where I was getting at [OVERLAPPING]

[00:28:37]

At least that.

[00:28:38]

Yes. We had friends who are a lot more familiar, but to help and advice on different thing.

[00:28:47]

There was a community there.

[00:28:48]

Definitely, it's one of the largest communities outside of Armenian.

[00:28:54]

Wonderful.

[00:28:56]

Like I said previously, it's a double-edged sword. Because for some people, and thankfully my family wasn't, but for some people because you have that strong supporting surrounded by so many people, and this is not just Armenian, I think it's very common in different pockets of communities, where you have, maybe Hispanics may be it was someone from Chinese, someone from another country where when you have that community, that community can also hurt you in the way that you will never, because it's your comfort zone, you will never go out of your comfort zone and you put yourself in a position where it's not comfortable for you to make a mistake, not understand something to fill really lost and sometimes it's right. Definitely it helps very much. But we were a lot more exposed to also going outside of the community and doing things outside of the community. I'm definitely not comfortable.

[00:30:10]

But for your parents, at least I don't know if your grandparents came with them, just our parents. At least to have some proximity with the culture that they loved.

[00:30:20]

Definitely.

[00:30:20]

Because it is an impact and it make people homesick and feel like, what am I doing here? Doubting themselves. At least for them, that will be, and for you too, at least a little bit of relief that not everything was dependent on you to just figure out later on maybe.

[00:30:38]

Yes. Definitely, I think in that sense, Los Angeles specifically where we lived and the majority of people who come first, they start off there because you have that community support you have friends, you have maybe relatives. You do have that support which is very important. That definitely makes things [OVERLAPPING] in one aspect. Just being able to get some traditional foods. You have that community and you definitely have the support. I think if you were to go to a city where there is [OVERLAPPING]

[00:31:15]

Nothing.

[00:31:15]

Nothing.

[00:31:16]

Nobody around.

[00:31:16]

Nobody around.

[00:31:18]

Would it be much tougher.

[00:31:19]

It would have been very different.

[00:31:20]

That's why I was thinking, thank God, your family had a community that gave them support because that would be a relief for you as a child. In high school to be able to focus on your studies and do everything that you did there. But relationships, how was your dealing with folks in the '90s in high school? I can see just a movie.

[00:31:50]

High School.

[00:31:52]

Was easy?

[00:31:53]

High School was [OVERLAPPING]

[00:31:54]

Bullying.

[00:31:56]

I would say, I concentrated a lot on pink. Because I didn't to. My high school had different tracks. I don't know if they have them here, but that specific school I went because there were so many students, during summer, they would also have regular school, but they would alternate between different tracks. I would have friends who were in a different track that spoke or I mean, yes, I would hang out with them. Then we met some other people as well as. When your English gets a little bit better, you start getting more friends. But I was taking a painting course, so my teacher would allow us to come during recesses and paint or draw in the studio. I would spend a lot of my time there just drawing or painting because I started it when I was back home, I started going to a Art Club. Then as a continuation this I brought my drawings with me and then as a continuation, I did that during the times where I didn't have maybe no one to eat lunch with or I wanted to just have my space. In a way it's like a protective. As a child, you don't want to be out there because everybody has this big groups of friends and then you're not.

[00:33:34]

Very typical.

[00:33:36]

Very typical. I don't think that the thought process was there when I was there. But I think as an adult reflecting back, I can see why that would be their very a defensive, it's a safe place for you to be so that you are doing something and you don't feel like as if you're just alone.

[00:33:59]

You consider yourself an introvert or extrovert at the time? Or whatever, if you consider yourself an introvert was caused by language barrier or a cultural barrier?

Our lovely conversation with Lilit Azizyan will continue on the next episode. [MUSIC]