

Title: Interview with Leonardo Beiler (Leo Beiler)

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Interviewed by Emily Krikke

EK: Leo, what is your full name?

LB: My name is Leonardo Beiler, I go by Leo in the U.S. and in Brazil I also go by Leo, but we say “Ley-oh” instead. I guess that’s just one of the accent things. You pronounce words differently in Brazil.

EK: So you are from Brazil, what city in Brazil?

LB: I was born and raised in Campinas, which is the interior of São Paulo. Both, São Paulo is a huge city. Campinas is a big city, but São Paulo is way bigger. I would say, Campinas is like Grand Rapids here.

EK: Ok. What age were you when you came to the U.S.?

LB: I was 17-years-old and I first arrived here on August, 2008.

EK: And were you here by yourself?

LB: Yes, I came here on an exchange student program, which I started in Brazil through a travel agency. The process was pretty straightforward. I had to fill out information about myself, and eventually that information went online and family’s here in the United States got to pick from a database, they got to select the people they were interested in. If there was a right fit, the agencies responsible would match up the person with the family. So I wasn’t actually able to pick where I was coming or where I was going to in the U.S. which, it’s good and bad, I guess.

EK: Did you have somewhere other than Michigan you wanted to go?

LB: If I could have chosen, I would apply one at some more South, to be a little warmer, I’m used to warm weather. So I would apply went with Florida or California because that’s just the most known states in the U.S. and what I mostly heard of growing up, so probably those.

EK: But you ended up... what city in Michigan?

LB: I ended up at Kentwood, Michigan and I went to East Kentwood high school for a year. I was only supposed to go there for six month, and then I ended up liking it and asked to extend my stay and I was able to. I had to fill out some forms, and I dealt that through the USCIS, which is the United States Citizenship and immigrations services.

EK: So what year in school did you finish in the U.S.?

LB: I came here and I was senior, so that's what I would've been in Brazil, so I was senior here. But I guess every exchange student here as considered senior. They get an honorary diploma completing a year here, which is an odd thing. I had other Brazilian friends doing an exchange student at East Kentwood high school, they were younger than me and they were also considered seniors and they got an honorary diploma of completing the year there. Which you know, the honorary diploma isn't really an actual diploma like what Americans get.

EK: Oh, such as like prove of completion today?

LB: Yeah, it's just like a something saying congratulations.

EK: How many other Brazilian students were in East Kenwood with you?

LB: There was only one other. I guess they usually get about one, every other year from Brazil over there.

EK: Were there any other students anywhere around the area of you? Or was it just the two?

LB: There are other exchange students in East Kenwood high school. One was from Ireland, I believe, and one from Spain. There must have also been other Brazilian kids going other school around but I didn't really get to meet any of them.

EK: What was life in Brazil like?

LB: I grew up in the somewhat wealthy family, so I had a maid growing up. We were also used to having things. We're likely to pay for a service to be done at our home than to do it ourselves. So I guess that's something different here at least from being in the house that I was here and being around people. They'd like to do things themselves before they tried to pay someone to be worth.

EK: Such as what?

LB: Like mowing the lawn, cleaning your pool, even my just cleaning the house inside, I had many grown-up and sorted all my neighbors pretty much. I guess they are a lot more affordable down there as well so, maybe that's also something. Maybe that's the reason why it's like that.

EK: Did you do any sports or recreation activities?

LB: Yeah, I always did after school activity, I went to an American school in Brazil. Because my family, they were able to afford that. It was only one in Campinas, Escola Americana de Campinas. And I was very fortunate to go there. Thankful to able to go there, as I was able to learn English growing up. I started it there, I would say in first grade, and I left there in ninth grade. So it was a pretty lengthy stay there. We both had classes in English and Portuguese. I had math in English, social sciences in English, so like history in English. Geography was all Portuguese though. We didn't have any English Geography. I had biology in English, Chemistry in English, and I didn't have any of those in Portuguese. So I would say the school I went to is more focused on the American educational system. A lot of it was very similar to what I learned and coming here and studying abroad.

EK: Where did you go after the ninth grade then?

LB: After the ninth grade, I transferred to a Brazilian school, because I was planning on furthering my higher education down there. So, I transferred to Brazilian school to get a better preparation for the college down there, but I ended up coming here my last year from high school. I ended up liking it so much. I met my wife here and so I decided to stay and fell in love here. I'm happy.

EK: What kind of sports did you participate in?

LB: Soccer mostly, and a little bit of basketball. I did play a little bit of softball for a semester, but that was only offered for a semester, it's not a very typical game in Brazil. I think Brazil has a baseball national team, but they are awful. You don't really see a lot of people playing baseball down there. It's mostly soccer, basketball, or volleyball... and swimming I would say.

EK: So basically, if you don't do soccer you don't do many sports?

LB: Yeah, my school... their main sport was soccer.

EK: What is the food like in Brazil?

LB: I ate pretty much rice and beans every day, with some sort of meat and vegetables on the side. And then every now and then we would switch things up, like had maybe some pasta, lunch or dinner...my maid always cooked lunch and my dad always cooked dinner pretty much. That's how it was.

EK: Not your mom? Your dad?

LB: And my mom also yes, she would cook as well, a little bit of dinner. But it was mostly my dad. He enjoyed cooking. Because my mom would also work on late, my dad got home earlier. So it was better for him to do that.

EK: So was that traditionally found in Brazil or just your family?

LB: Just my family I would say. A lot of other my friends had the maid cook both lunch and dinner. I think that's mostly how it is if you have a maid. And a lot of times they would actually sleep at your house too, but not always. My maid actually, in the beginning when I was younger, we had a maid who slept at our house, but when I grew up we didn't one I guess as much so...they weren't around.

EK: And what your parents do?

LB: Well my dad, he graduated with electronics. He was an electronic engineer and he worked for a telecommunication company in Brazil called Telebrás. He retired fairly early, when he was 55, which is very young and not typical. It's usually like 60 in Brazil nowadays. Maybe when he got retired might have been normal to retire that early. And my mom, she has her own esthetic clinic. After my dad retired, he started working with my mom helping her do some administration work for the business.

EK: Is it typical for both parents to work?

LB: Yeah, I would say so. Most of the time both parents would work.

EK: How did they react to you coming to America?

LB: They were very encouraging and happy for the opportunity to come abroad. They weren't so happy when they found out I was gonna be staying here. They knew they would be missing me a lot. So they weren't as supportive of my decision to stay here. But, the fact that I ended up having a wife and a child, then they were more accepting of it.

EK: How long would you say it took them to become accepted?

LB: Probably, like a year I would say. I can't imagine that wasn't easy, because my intentions were to go back to Brazil. When they found out that I wasn't coming back, then I'm sure it was hard for them to hear that.

EK: So what was that made you want to come to school in America?

LB: I've always wanted to come to the U.S., so I was excited to just see how it was up here. I figured since I already knew English growing up, it wouldn't be as hard coming up here. And also going to the American school I had already learned little bit of the American educational system. So that also helped a lot.

EK: Do you think going to the American school made you more interested in coming to America?

LB: Possibly, there's a chance I would have maybe wanted to go to a different country, but it's hard to say. I don't know.

EK: So what was the experience like coming here? How did you get to America?

LB: Well, it was through that exchange student program and then when I got here, I stayed with a family. I was with them for a whole year. Actually, I ended up living with them for four years here.

EK: Did you take a plane here?

LB: Yes.

EK: How long is the flight?

LB: The flight is about twelve hours I would say.

EK: What was it like going through the customs at the airport?

LB: It's not fun. I was very nervous the first time, because I didn't know what kind of questions they would be asking me and if I ended up answering something wrong, what they did... want me to go be questioned in a different room or something, I don't know. I was very nervous, but it wasn't bad.

EK: How long did it end up taking, if you remember?

LB: It probably took me like an hour of standing in line to pass through customs.

EK: Do you remember how many questions they asked to you?

LB: Well, just where I would be going and why and how long I would be staying here?

EK: Do you think the fact that you were coming as a student in high school... if through the exchange student helps make that process easier, or do you think it's about the same for what you saw?

LB: It was probably a lot easier because the travel agency was behind it and they were able to gather all my information. I had a time and I had proof that I was coming here to study, rather than just visit. It's a lot harder to get a tourist visa, because then they want to prove that you're gonna be wanting to go back to your country. Nowadays it's just a lot harder being processed because of so many people trying to come here illegally. But I find that to be a little... a disadvantage of that is a lot of people trying to come here for the right reasons sometimes get their visa denied, because the reviewing process is so extensive now.

EK: Do you know people that that has happened too?

LB: Yeah, my parents have friends that have tried coming and haven't been able to. They were trying to come as tourists and I think that's the one usually gets denied most.

EK: The tourist visa?

LB: Yeah, the tourist visa. I think usually students and work visas are easier because you have documentation on what you will be doing here. There's usually proof of some U.S. agency or something to show for that.

EK: Do you think that's gotten more common that they would get denied as our illegal immigration numbers have rose?

LB: Most definitely, yes. I think nowadays, it's harder to enter the U.S. than it was in the past. Just because the number of people trying to come here I guess also grew.

EK: What types of job have you had here?

LB: My very first job here was as a lifeguard at Grand Rapids community college, which is what I did as soon as I graduated from high school, and maybe took semester off and started going to GRCC. Then, about a semester after going to CC... or the first semester there I took a swimming class and while there I really liked the pool there and started asking the lifeguards how I could get a job there and they just told me how to pass lifeguarding certification class. So, I started doing that and I worked there for three years.

EK: And that's also where I met you I believe?

LB: Yes. That's also where we met. We had a lot of good times working together. It was a really nice place to work.

EK: Have you worked anywhere up here in Houghton?

LB: Yes, actually in Grand Rapids for summer I needed more money, so I also worked at a factory; Cascade Engineering, on an assembly line. But I only did that for one summer. That's about the only two jobs. Well, I actually did some work also for an elder person, like helping him

with just random things around his house, and that's about the kinds of job I had in Grand Rapids. Then I transferred Michigan Tech to pursue my bachelor's on computer network and system administration. Up here I've had two jobs. One as high-performance computing intern in the Information Technology Services Department at Tech, and I'm currently working at place called Ramsey 1, which is place where we provide technical support and we also provide services about twelve school districts and Upper Peninsula which include the Copper Country Intermediate School District, like Bessemer which is going west of Houghton. There's also like Adams, and a bunch of other ones that I don't even know if anyone would know.

EK: Do you think that being from Brazil has affected any of your job interviews, or you getting a job, or your working?

LB: I think for the jobs out had so far it hasn't given the any advantage, but I think once I graduate and seek on a job at a multinational company, which is what I have been trying to do. I definitely think that being bilingual and growing up in Brazil will help.

EK: Did you face any judgment from people who you were trying to get a job from, or any disadvantages?

LB: Not that I am aware of. I don't think I've had any racial...

EK: Hostility?

LB: Yes. I don't think so, but I do imagine that would be a problem for some people coming from maybe different countries, maybe like Iran and countries where there's more conflict with the U.S. and stuff.

EK: So you haven't in the job. What about in society? Have you ever experienced any discrimination or heard stories of other people that have encountered discrimination?

LB: Not really. I'm trying to think here. I'm sure it's happened, but I'm not that I can think of at the moment.

EK: Do you think that it's because Brazil's not considered too foreign in the U.S. or because the U.S. is becoming more accepting?

LB: It can be both, but I would say mostly because at least that I'm aware of I don't know that Brazil has any issues with the U.S. or vice versa.

EK: So when you were going through the citizenship process was it difficult?

LB: Yes, it was quite confusing at first. I was here as an exchange student and then I decided when I eventually started dating a girl and we got married and had a child together. So at first I didn't know what to do. So I started applying for a change of status visa. I spent money on that and that was just a waste of time and money, because later I was told when I got a lawyer to just apply for the green card and that would've already put me in a good status being here. My student visa had already expired. So when it expired I actually went to Brazil and I came back with a tourist visa, and then from a tourist visa, I didn't know what steps to take. And then that's when I tried to change my status. It would've been easier just to do the green card process.

EK: What made you try the changing of status first? Just cause that was all you...

LB: Yeah, from reading online, technically I'm changing my status from tourist to some other thing. So I figured that was the form I had to fill out and pay for...I guess that's one way of doing it, but it wasn't the most cost effective, best way to do it. So eventually I just canceled that and applied for the green card instead.

EK: And what made you decide to do that?

LB: Well, I talked to lawyers, and they told me "you definitely wanted to be doing it this other way." I was fortunate to have also, my wife's family knew good lawyers and I was able to get in touch with them, and get advice from them. Also fortunately, I was able to get the lawyer fee waved which was very nice, but I still have to pay like \$1,500 to get the green card.

EK: And how long did that? Was that good for?

LB: The green card was good for two years I believe, and then I had to renew the green card. And then I filled out the form. And then I had to pay like, I was supposed to \$750 to renew it, to renew my green card to extend it for 10 years. But I also filled out the form to get the fee waved and fortunately, I was able to get that fee waved. So I didn't have to pay \$750 which was very helpful.

EK: So if somebody else's going through the process, what would you suggest for them to do?

LB: I would definitely say get a lawyer, it will save your lot of time. Because if you don't do it with the lawyer eventually they're just gonna start sending you mail back and saying that you're missing information or you didn't fill out something correctly. So just to avoid the headache, I would just get a lawyer and also apply for the fee to be waved for the green card if you have financial hardship.

EK: Now for, when you want to go back, cause your family is still in Brazil, your parents are. When you want to go back with your wife and daughter? Is it difficult to go back and return?

LB: Yes. It's really hard but mostly of just because of the money. It is expensive to flight down there. Tickets are usually \$1,400 to travel from here. From Florida, you can find them as low as \$800, but right now, if I were to travel for Christmas there at least \$1,200 per person. But yes, and then time also, getting time for school. We get a very short break at the end of the year so it's hard to travel then. And in the middle of the year, I'm trying to get internships to further my knowledge and experience in the field I want to go in to. So, it's likely that I won't be going to Brazil for another year; until after I graduate.

EK: When is the last time that you have been back to Brazil?

LB: Actually we were able to go for Christmas last year. And I've been here for five years. That was the very first time we were able to go at the end of the year. But for that I had to leave like a week early from school and get finals done earlier. And I also had to arrive here a week later. Otherwise it just wouldn't be worth it, going to Brazil and only being there two weeks. So I was able to stay for like four weeks.

EK: Were your teachers easy to work with?

LB: Yes, I definitely talked to them before I went there. Just to be sure that it wouldn't be a problem.

EK: When you were going through customs either in Brazil or in the U.S., was it harder for you than say, Hannah your wife, or was it the same for both?

LB: I would say it's probably harder for people from different countries because usually they're trying to travel with things that have more value, just because it's cheaper to have things here in the U.S., so maybe they are trying to take stuff back to their home country. And so they are trying to make sure that people are doing it the right way, because you are supposed to pay taxes if you exceed a certain amount. And lot of people don't want to pay taxes, so they try to buy stuff, stick it in the suitcase and just take things with them. So definitely customs are targeting probably more immigrants or people from different countries.

EK: So that was the first time that you'd been back to Brazil in five years, how often do you talk to your family while in America?

LB: I talk to them every Sunday, or at least try to. Ever since I came here, I started a habit of talking with them every Sunday and that's how it's been. We skype, that's how we do it. And now with iPhones, I have iPhones in my family as well down there, so we just use FaceTime now.

EK: Is that easier than skyping? More convenient?

LB: Yes, I think it's a little more convenient and I feel like it works little better too. You get a better picture quality.

EK: Do you get to talk to both of your parents usually every Sunday, your siblings, or is it hit and miss?

LB: Right now it's a three hour difference. Earlier it was a one hour difference and then we had to push back our clock and they had to advance theirs down there. So now it's a three hour

difference and a lot of the times I'll call when it's pretty late, so my dad will already be sleeping. He sleeps early. So a lot of the times I will only talk to my mom, and both my brother and sister, they're not living in Campinas anymore. So I usually don't talk to them as much unless they're visiting. But I'm skyping my parents, you know, or FaceTime.

EK: Do you ever email or call, text, anything?

LB: We use WhatsApp to send messages every now and then. We don't really e-mail. I don't really send much letters down there either, but I probably should.

EK: It's hard to remember.

LB: Yes.

EK: How often has your family been here to visit?

BL: My mom's been here twice, and the first time she came, she came with my sister. Just the two of them. And they were able to be here for my marriage and my daughter's birth, so that was nice. And that was in 2009, at the end of the year, or actually no... that was the middle of the year. My mom was able to come back one other time. I met with her in Florida. And then my dad and my brother were able to come once, and they came to Michigan, and then eventually we all traveled to California for a week. So, both my mom and dad, sister, and brother have all been able to come visit. They couldn't all come at the same time, but they've made it up here.

EK: What are you most reminiscent about your home country? Or what do you miss the most?

LB: Probably just family and friends the most. I reminisce every now and then about going to bars when I was younger, I feel like that's a lot easier to do in Brazil. People don't check as much an ID. I used to be like 16 and I would go to the bars and drink with friends. And my mom and dad were actually okay with that as well, but they weren't as okay with my sister doing that. So I guess there's also a little bit of the gender difference. Some things are more acceptable for men to do than women. Yeah, I think just playing soccer as well. I've only played soccer for like a year, since I've been here, so I don't do that much here. Just mostly of because... I could I guess, but I just don't. I don't know.

EK: It's not as common.

LB: Yeah, I don't have many friends that do it. I usually disc golf nowadays. I love doing that.

EK: Is there any disc golf in Brazil?

LB: No, no disc golf in Brazil. I guess we play ultimate Frisbee though, sometimes.

EK: Have there been any huge social or economic changes, even political changes that you've noticed in the U.S. since coming here?

LB: The economy in Brazil, it's somewhat different. It's a lot different than here, and Brazil is also developing country. So I feel like poor people in Brazil have it way worse than poor people in the U.S.

EK: How so?

LB: Yes, Brazil has a lot of slums, poor people. They're usually working as maids or construction workers; and for some reason, construction workers don't make a lot of money. Unless it's the contractor's actual business, but the people actually doing the construction, they usually don't get paid a lot. And they live in slums so they have to pretty much build their own house. I don't even know how they get electricity. I'm sure a lot of people don't even have electricity and water. And there's a lot of homeless people.

EK: Do they have a lot of government aid?

LB: I know there are some programs put in place, but not nearly as many as in the U.S. There's a lot of corruption going on with the Brazilian Government. The past few years... that's definitely slowed down the development of the country a lot, because it could be doing way better.

EK: When did that start?

LB: I feel like it's always been present in the history of Brazil. But I think it's been worse lately, at least what it seems like...

EK: Are you glad to be with our government system? Or would you rather be back in Brazil?

LB: No here, very happy to be here. I definitely wouldn't wanna be living there. Especially because I don't make a lot of money now, I'm a college student. So I feel like I benefit a lot from the government here, and in Brazil there would be nothing to help like that to help. So I'm very thankful for being here and for having the government to help like that.

EK: What are some of the most bizarre social things that you've noticed in America that you would never, or rarely see in Brazil? What are the most amusing weird things that we do?

LB: I would say that mostly burping is the thing that comes to my mind right now, I feel like it's more acceptable to burp while you are eating here in the U.S., or just in general. I know still families here in the U.S., some families don't like it either, but I feel like it's more accepted here. Whereas most families in Brazil probably not... think that's very gross to burp while eating or something.

EK: Do you think that's a loss of a tradition here in the U.S.? Like Brazil's just more traditional in that aspect, like with proper manners, or just that American's are more comfortable (laughs)? I don't know.

LB: I don't know exactly. Yeah, maybe.

EK: What do you think are some issues that U.S. has with their immigration right now? With the whole process and everything. If you could change anything, what would you change about it?

LB: I don't know what I would change, but I do know that there are a lot of people trying to come to the U.S. with the right reasons, and they just can't make it because the reviewing process is so harsh nowadays, but that's also a good thing. It keeps a lot of illegal people from coming in. So there's good and bad. Other than that, I can't think of anything at the moment.

EK: So when you immigrated here, did it match your expectations of what you thought it would be like? Was it more difficult to transition? Was the whole process what you thought or was it worse, better?

LB: As far as immigrating, I don't know because I didn't... before I left Brazil, my intentions weren't on immigrating here. I was just coming for the exchange program. What was the question again? I lost my train of thought.

EK: Was it what you expected when you went through it all?

LB: Yeah, I would say that the exchange program was about what I expected. There was a person in charge and she would check up with me every now and then, and make sure things were going well, and if I had any issues in someone's report that too and she could do something about it. Maybe put me in different house or something if I had the need to. So that was pretty much how I expected it to be. And you know going to an American school in Brazil also helped with that, because I had already... I knew a little bit already of how things worked here as far as education goes. I didn't have a problem with that.

EK: The English that you learned in your classes in Brazil, was it really different when you actually came here or was that pretty much same? I know Spanish classes that I take, or even French classes, it's not like how my French sister actually talks, and she doesn't understand half of what I'm saying. So did you get that language barrier even though you knew English, or was it pretty cut and dry?

LB: I feel like since I learned English through the American school it was... we had American teachers there so they didn't have Brazilian accent or nothing. But I would say for the people that learn English through different schools in Brazil, then yeah. It's taught way differently. I'm sure that they have a lot harder time coming here and understanding, or being used to the way the English is spoken by the teachers there, and how the English is actually spoken by Americans. So I'm pretty sure there's a big difference there.

EK: Well, I want to thank you for this interview with me. It's been great. I've enjoyed it.

LB: Glad to able to share some of my experiences and some my background.

EK: Is there anything else you would like to add?

LB: Not in particular.

EK: Alright. Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW