

THE TRUTH:

Newcomers build bridges

By Randa El Ozeir

A few children, clearly representing different ethnic backgrounds, are playing together in Toronto's High Park.

A casual passer-by might not give this scene a second glance. But listen: something should catch your ear. As the children play, they chatter and shout to each other in English. When their parents and grandparents call, they quickly shift to their respective mother tongues.

In a country like Canada, as in other immigrant-receiving countries, some see newcomers as clustering in isolated groups that stick together against the 'outside' world. But the reality I see in the park today gives the lie to the myth of the insular immigrant.

Canada prides itself on being a land of immigrants.

Our citizenship guide boasts of the millions of newcomers who have helped to build and defend our way of life over the last 200 years. Many immigrants have a true feeling of belonging to the country and see Canada as offering a home for themselves, and their future children,

that is free of discrimination on the basis of their origins, their differences.

And yet, racialization is still a reality in Canada. Even established citizens are often assumed to be recent immigrants because of their skin colour. However, mixed marriages are helping to blur the colour line and decrease social distance between racialized and white Canadians.

In 2006, nearly 300,000 Canadians were involved in mixed marriages or mixed common-law relationships; that's a rise of nearly 30 per cent from 2001. The same census of 2006 found that the vast majority of interracial couples (85 per cent) involve a white person and a visible minority individual.

That's just one of the reasons that immigrants must quickly learn to balance back-home-country and new-home-country culture. Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters, or HIPPY, is an international program intended to teach parents to become their children's first teachers. HIPPY Canada has a twelve-year history



Lubna Khalid shares an intimate moment with her children at the graduation ceremony of the Newcomer Speaker's Bureau, held April 27, 2011 at Toronto City Hall.

© Alejandro Neira

of helping newcomer children to move comfortably between their home culture and language and their expanded Canadian social world—while also helping parents, especially mothers, to overcome social isolation and make friends across cultures. The key seems to lie in welcoming the new while cherishing the old.

“We do respect our families and their cultures, and we educate them on the Canadian culture as well,” explains HIPPIY manager Sylvie Charlie Karam. That Canadian culture is increasingly about dialogue between cultures. “We research very specific celebrations of our 210 families of newcomers, such as Nowrouz, Ramadan and Chinese New Year, and incorporate them in our [multi-ethnic] group meetings,” she says.

At the YMCA’s Newcomer Settlement Program, approximately 70 per cent of the staff are foreign born. Altogether, they speak 45 international languages. Here, integration is the name of the game.

“We find that newcomers generally are very open with each other and want to learn and experience new cultures,” says Teresa Costa, General Manager of Newcomer Settlement Programs at the Y. “They are also very willing to share their culture with others.”

To build on that natural desire to reach out, Costa’s program promotes ethno-specific and faith-based events and celebrations to build awareness and respect for our differences while emphasizing what diverse newcomers have in common.

“We provide newcomers with as many community referrals as possible for services that do not cater to a specific ethnic group unless the client is more comfortable in obtaining services within their own ethnic community.”

Ethno-specific communities can indeed be a first bridge for newcomers, helping them find roots in Canada before venturing further afield. But they’re not the only way.

“Immigrants might stick to their communities only at the beginning when they find themselves in a new place,” explains Lubna Khalid, a medical lab assistant from Pakistan who came to Canada in 2000. Now a Canadian citizen, she has reached out of her home community by becoming a member of the Newcomer Speakers Bureau at the Mennonite New Life Centre.

Through the Speakers Bureau training series this winter and spring, immigrants and refugees from twelve different countries shared their stories, finding strength in shared struggles and hope in shared dreams.

“I spoke about my culture and, at the same time, I listened to the others and was open to the differences,” Khalid says. Working in Canada and being exposed to the issues her clients face has helped as well.

Not that it’s always easy. Carolina Mateo Gonzalez, a psychologist who came as a refugee from Mexico in 2008 and who now works in an Ontario Early Years Centre, needed to adapt quickly to different mores. “I appreciate physical contact like hugs and kisses; however, in Canada, and especially in a multicultural city like Toronto, I have had to learn that not everybody is comfortable with such gestures.”

“An immigrant will always carry a “dual” personality, adding a new perspective to his “old” one,” cautions cross-cultural trainer Julio Pena. “The key to success in such a process is adaptation and being proactive.”

Here in High Park, my daughter and her friends adapt every second, shifting constantly between old and new, abandoning nothing. It’s not so easy for all of us. But for every bridge built between cultures, what we gain is easily worth the effort to connect.

RANDA EL OZEIR

Randa is an internationally trained journalist who immigrated to Canada in 2008.

Randa works as a remote editor for BabyCenter Arabia.com.

Randa’s media experience covers the online, print and broadcast spectrum. She’s interested in political and cultural areas, as well as women’s social issues.

