

Over the Rainbow

A new wave of immigrants struggle to make a home in Alberta

By Cheryl Mahaffy

It's a night of laughter, celebration and long-stemmed red roses as Edmonton's Multicultural Health Brokers unveil *Support from the Heart*, a 20-minute film about their work with pregnant newcomers and families. Lights flick on, and the women of the co-operative take the stage to thank those who've stood with them. In Vietnamese, Mandarin, Hindi, Punjabi, Urdu, French, Cantonese, Tagalog, Somali, Spanish and English, the women form a chorus that speaks to me of the Alberta we have become: a multihued, multirooted landing pad for people from afar.

Indeed, each new, increasingly diverse wave of immigrants challenges our stereotype of settled whiteness. The 1996 census counted 15 per cent foreign-born Albertans, 10 per cent visible minorities. That percentage has risen since, particularly in Calgary, Canada's third most ethnically diverse city, where it's predicted every fourth resident will be a visible minority as early as 2004. Twelve thousand or more immigrants arrive each year, while the Alberta-born population growth dives toward zero with the low birth rate and aging demographic. In a quarter century, half of our population growth will come from afar, predicts the Canada West Foundation.

Support from the Heart captures snapshots of the health brokers' own coming. Sarah Borquez from Chile gives birth in a hospital where she understands not a word, then agonizes for three days that the blue-faced newborn snatched from her arms may have died. (Fortunately, the baby lived.) Surinder Bhaliwal accompanies her husband from India, only to discover that her master's degree in education attracts no job offers, even when topped up by a made-in-Canada after-degree. Both women immigrated in the 1970s, when discrimination was more overt. Yet they, like many who work on the front lines, say today's newcomers face all-too-similar situations, particularly when language and looks set them apart.

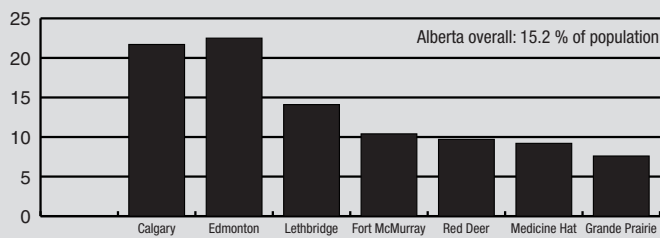
But as the brokers' lives reflect, the story need not end

there. "In my work, I am teaching again," says Bhaliwal. "I get satisfaction when I see the sparkle in mothers' eyes. So I have accomplished what I set out to do, but in a different way." Just as these women use their own struggles and insights to help 1,500 families a year step through the minefields of Canadian health, education and law, so many newcomers bring skills and resilience that could build the Alberta Advantage in ways no money can buy.

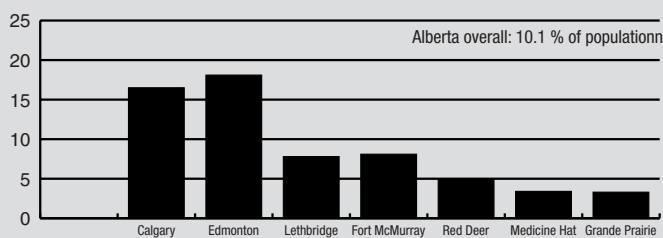
Increasingly, our nation will depend on those skills to fill labour gaps. As early as 2008, says the Centre for Spatial Economics, Canada will need a half million newcomers a year, a dramatic doubling of immigration, to avoid economic slowdown. Not since 1913, when mostly white pioneers were peopling the West, has the annual influx risen above 400,000. In 2000, one of the highest receiving years since 1957, Canada accepted 267,000 immigrants. This time the mix is far more diverse, notes Madeline Kalback, chair in Canadian Ethnic Studies at the University of Calgary; the percentage of visible minorities is rising ever closer to half, most from Asian countries but also from other regions such as the Middle East and Africa.

Given those trends, it's sobering that 53 per cent of Albertans told Angus Reid in the spring of 2000 that immigration is already too high. In the culturally charged atmosphere following September 11, when shadowy figures turned airplanes lethal, that reluctant majority may well have swelled. "The Canadian electorate is somewhere between wary and hostile to increased immigration, and therefore a case must be made," Canada West CEO Roger Gibbins told those attending *Pioneers 2000*, a gathering called precisely because the prairie provinces (particularly Manitoba and Saskatchewan) fail to attract their share of immigrants. "We must strive for excellence in the field of immigration as we have striven for excellence in other fields."

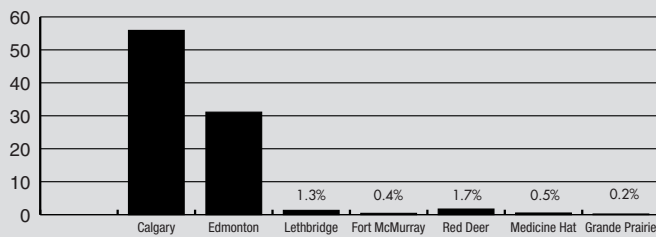
Immigrants as Per Cent of Population, 1996 ⁽¹⁾



Visible Minorities as Per Cent of Population, 1996 ⁽¹⁾



Where Immigrants Settle:
Per Cent of Total Entering Alberta, 1999 ⁽²⁾



(1) 1996 Census of Canada (2) Alberta Learning, *An Overview of Immigration to Alberta, 1998-99*, Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 1999.

ALBERTA IS AMONG THOSE PROVINCES ATTRACTING LESS THAN its share of immigrants: home to 9.8 per cent of Canada's population, we welcomed just 6.2 per cent of the nation's newcomers in the year 2000. With business crying for bodies to support a booming economy while millions around the world live in danger, you'd think we'd do whatever it takes to roll out the welcome mat—toward economic and humanitarian ends. In reality, the record is mixed. For every Rita Espescht and her computer-savvy husband, who easily gained entry in 2001 after choosing Alberta over the corruption of Brazil, there's a family Rassuli, refugees who have poured a fortune into stymied efforts to extract frightened Afghan relatives from Pakistan (see *Eye on Alberta*, p. 12). For every sign of appreciated difference, such as high rates of ethnic intermarriage, there's the 53 per cent of refugees in Medicine Hat who experience racist encounters. For every Calgary, which has pulled far ahead of Edmonton in attracting immigrants, there's a Lethbridge, which loses half its refugees due to such factors as poor settlement services.

That same bipolarity weaves through many an immigrant's days. Perched on a stool in Grounds for Coffee

Alberta attracts less than its share of immigrants: with 9.8 per cent of Canada's population, Alberta became home to just 6.2 per cent of immigrants in 2000.

beside three other poets from elsewhere, Henry Victor paints that charged existence, with its plus and minus poles. "There are things so attractive here," he notes, including the opportunity to stage poetry that, in his native Sri Lanka, is banned. "But there are lots and lots of horrible things. In fact, back awhile I wrote a poem, 'From the frying pan to the fire.'" Pressed to name the fire, he cites racial prejudice, "encountered at every corner." But, he adds, "If I'm continuing to survive here, it is because there are those who have overcome that—in whom I see the opposite of that. Is Canada good or bad? It is always a mixed thing."

Later, in the cocoon of his northeast Edmonton apartment, Victor traces the journey that has inspired 150 poems in the 15 months since he left Sri Lanka—a journey echoed, if less lyrically, by so many newcomers. An outspoken member of a minority group despised by the nation's two warring parties, Victor steered clear of Toronto, where many Sri Lankans have carried their grudges. While not initially enamoured of Edmonton as a destination, he has quickly grown to love its just-right size and beauty. "I left behind the bo tree, but I found the poplar," he says. Yet he has fears, particularly for daughter Gitanjali, in Grade 8, whose safety, ironically, prompted him to leave the danger that energized his poetry. "Families are not stable here," he says, adding that each one is insular rather than inviting the watchful eye of neighbouring adults. "I'm very frightened of teenage pregnancy," he says, not to mention smoking and drugs. Most of all, though, he fears a shift in values. "Before we came, my daughter used to sympathize with the small and the weak and the powerless. Already, I see a shift taking place."

Those same attitudes of superiority marred Victor's entry into Alberta. "I had just celebrated my 50th birthday, and the 25th anniversary of my priesthood," he says. "I was thinking, 'I have matured, I have lots to offer.' But people here say I have no experience. And not only me, but a lot who come. Look at the number of doctors driving cabs." So this poet-priest-professor delivered pizza, became a janitor—anything to put bread on the table. "Something is wrong in this," he says. "Not that I lack humility to do that; potato picking gives me lots of experiences for my poetry. But it is a crime to waste resources. I have gone through expensive training to get a PhD, and also invested lots of hard work. Obviously you don't need a PhD to clean Save-on-Foods toilets."

In lieu of paid positions, Victor received patronizing advice—advice satirized in his poem "Shark and the

salmon,” in which heaps of small salmon kindly offer to teach a world-wise shark how to swim. “They tell me I must volunteer,” he says. “What makes you to think I have not done all those things?” In fact, Victor was invited to New York days before we met, to receive an award for his dedication to peace from the Inter-religious and International Federation for World Peace.

“Inwardly, I wanted to live in a place that’s corruption free,” he muses. “That’s where I made my mistake. I thought Canada was a kind of utopia. Then you discover, in very subtle ways, that humans are humans wherever they are.

“But I am not going to go back. I will ‘run until I win,’ and also see that ‘it happens’ to me,” he adds, quoting from his work. “I have something to offer to Alberta, and I’m wanting to contribute. Whether coloured or white it doesn’t matter; all immigrants have something to offer. People must, in their heart, find a space for us.

“Of course,” he adds, “We also have a lot to learn.”

VICTOR’S EMPLOYMENT STRUGGLES ARE FAR FROM UNIQUE. Unemployment and under-employment are above average among visible minority immigrants, despite the fact that seven in every 10 adult newcomers have some post-secondary education and four in 10 have completed university. The picture is particularly stark for certain subsets in Edmonton: 11 per cent unemployment among immigrants from Central and South America and 9 per cent among those from the Middle East, compared to 5.4 per cent among Canadian-born workers. In addition, many immigrants are not even counted in the labour force. And many individuals and groups become stuck in low-paying, low-status niches, according to an analysis of three decades of census data by demographer Ravi Pendakur.

Income statistics reflect this. Nearly half (45 per cent) who entered Alberta between 1990 and 1996 live below the poverty line, double the norm. Immigrant women are especially at risk, no matter how long they’ve lived here: across the prairie provinces, 72 per cent were earning \$9,999 or less at the time of the 1996 census; 41 per cent were earning \$4,999 or less. In Alberta, income struggles are heightened by low social assistance rates, which fail to cover costs—especially in cities such as Fort McMurray, where an apartment easily rents at \$1,000 a month.

The figures, coupled with anecdotal reports, strongly suggest systemic discrimination, says the University of Alberta’s Baha Abu-Laban, who recently received a federal Citation for Citizenship for his leadership at the Prairie Centre of Excellence for Research on Immigration and Integration. “People come here with social and cultural capital,” he says. “If they’re not allowed to reach their potential, Canada is the loser in the end.” Colleague Marlene Mulder agrees. “Labour market integration is where work needs to be done,” she says. “Many settlement agencies are trying to be creative, but it’s not enough.”

Among creative initiatives is the Engineering Technologists Integration Project (ETIP), a provincially

Scanning the province

As many as 90% of recent immigrants live in Alberta’s two largest cities, with the rest concentrated in Red Deer, Medicine Hat, Lethbridge, Fort McMurray and Grande Prairie. In earlier decades, Edmonton received more immigrants than Calgary; that fact is still reflected in the cities’ population mix. But Calgary has pulled far ahead of the capital city in recent years through a combination of economics, climate and proactive service. There’s also a snowball effect, with immigrants often making secondary moves within Alberta to live among others from their homeland.

Lack of education and job opportunities are often cited as concerns by immigrants who choose to leave smaller cities. In addition, a 1998 survey of Alberta refugees spotted particular concerns in some cities: in Lethbridge, dissatisfaction with immigration services; in Medicine Hat, discrimination and racism; in Fort McMurray and Grande Prairie, high cost of living, isolation and climate, leading to retention rates as low as one-third.

Alberta’s foreign-born population is diverse. In 1999, 56% of Alberta’s immigration came from these top 10 source countries: China (12%), India (9.9%), the Philippines (9.4%), Pakistan (4.6%), the United States (4.5%), England (4.4%), Korea (4.2%), Bosnia (2.5%), Germany (2.3%) and the Netherlands (2.2%). Typically, just over half of new immigrants say they speak English.

The Canada West Foundation tabulates net migration, capturing those who leave as well as those who arrive. In 2000, Alberta gained 12,809 and lost 7,127, for a net gain of 5,662 among a total population of 2,997,236. Immigration contributed 20% to Alberta’s growth between 1972 and 2000; the foundation expects that figure will more than double by 2026, reaching 48.3% due to increased immigration, low birth rates and an aging population. Even more dramatic, the foundation says immigration will account for a full 100% of population growth in the nation as a whole.

The bulk of Alberta’s newcomers (54% in 1999) are independent class immigrants, chosen for their potential to contribute to the economy. Another 35% are family class, sponsored by a close relative who is a Canadian citizen or permanent resident. The remaining 11% are accepted as refugees. Some observers fear the balance will tilt further from humanitarian concerns in entrepreneurial Alberta, despite the strengths brought by resilient, resourceful refugees.

funded collaboration of the Edmonton Mennonite Centre for Newcomers (EMCN), the Alberta Society of Engineers and Technologists and the Northern Alberta Institute of Technology. Jack Davediuk coordinates the program on behalf of EMCN. “Over the years, we’ve noticed an enormous increase in the number of professional immigrants arriving only to find out very rudely and very quickly that virtually no governing body recognizes their credentials, even though they’ve been told by consulates around the world that they’ll get a job off the plane in 15 minutes,” he says. Recognizing that immigrant engineers experience for expertise in the sector, the agency decided to start there.



Perched on a stool in Grounds for Coffee beside three other poets, Henry Victor paints that charged existence with its plus and minus poles. His poem “From the frying pan to the fire” cites racial prejudice as the fire.

Typically, the Alberta engineering profession requires individuals trained elsewhere to work for an Alberta employer for two years (often a tough sell with no Canadian credentials), pass an extremely high-level English exam and write a spectrum of challenge exams at \$140 each. “We take all these barriers and throw them out the window,” Davediuk says. Instead, ETIP puts carefully screened professionals through 10 condensed months of training in language, job readiness and engineering specifics, then supports their job search. Each student receives a provincial grant of about \$8,000, thus minimizing a typical immigrant conundrum of exorbitant settlement debts. After one year with an Alberta employer, ETIP graduates become fully certified technologists, eligible to seek recertification as engineers by writing two exams.

Since its pilot in 1996, the program has trained 134 engineers; 121 are now working in their fields of expertise. “If you saw some of these résumés, your head would spin,” says Davediuk. “These are some of the most brilliant minds that walk this planet; once they prove themselves, anything is within their realm.” Each year, the province expands ETIP funding, yet hundreds are turned away. Meanwhile, educators and politicians near and far pick Davediuk’s brain. “Quite frankly, I would like to see this thing offered in every province across Canada,” he says. “Many people uproot themselves to come study here, because Edmonton is the only place it’s available.”

It’s time for governments and all professions to take a cue from ETIP’s success, Mulder says. Alberta Learning does verify some incoming credentials at employer request, and is making plans to join a federal program in which provinces nominate immigrants to fill labour needs. But thousands a year will continue to arrive in Alberta who don’t fit those categories, yet need to prove their skill—or learn new skills. “Immigrants are not saying, ‘recognize my credentials if I don’t meet the standard,’” Mulder adds. “They are quite happy to be tested and fill gaps in their knowledge. But they are saying, ‘I don’t want to start at square one.’ And I think that’s fair.”

IN TRUTH, IT’S IMPOSSIBLE FOR IMMIGRANTS TO BEGIN AT square one. For better or worse, they carry the experience of another life, with its complex weave of customs, conflicts—and for some, trauma. Tigist Dafla knows full well

what that means—as immigrant, as settlement worker with Edmonton Catholic Social Services, as a member of the Canadian Council for Refugees and as grassroots volunteer. Her family hails from northeast Africa’s tiny Eritrea, but she grew up in now-enemy Ethiopia, and married an Ethiopian. Seeking to support fellow African immigrants in Edmonton, she’s often stymied by distrust; like a world car, she’s built with parts from all over, so doesn’t quite fit anywhere.

Yet Dafla perseveres, because she knows what newcomers endure. Many remain burdened by left-behinds: for the 10 to 15 per cent of immigrants who are refugees, those often include immediate or extended family, precious belongings, even proof of identity. Daily they encounter assumptions that they can make do with little, when of course they’re here in search of a better life. Always, they wrestle with change.

Students from the refugee camps of Sudan, for example, may never have gone to school, instead learning stark survival in a culture crushed by 50 years of war. Furthermore, like fully 72 per cent of Alberta immigrants 19 and younger, they may speak little English. Funding for the province’s 19,000 English as a Second Language students has more than tripled in the past five years to \$14.5-million annually, says Alberta Learning spokesperson Jerry Bellikka. But ESL is just one part of the challenge for students struggling to catch up while straddling two often contradictory cultures. “You can’t just put them in with their age and expect them to function,” Dafla points out, yet that happens. So Dafla and her CSA colleagues run homework clubs, respond to crises, mediate. They stand between parents desperate to retain at least a shred of back-home expectation and teens seeking acceptance among adventurous peers; between taunted newcomers who survive by the fist and authorities determined to run a safe school. But the work is always stop-gap and seen by some principals as invading their turf. By contrast, Dafla says, in Toronto schools, “people like us are in place at all times.”

Similarly, Dafla works alongside Edmonton’s Multicultural Health Brokers to connect immigrant families with services taken for granted by the mainstream. Here too, she says, “Our job is to be in between.” At a Health for Two session for Sudanese mothers, for example,

a pregnant mom confides she hasn't filled a costly prescription for diabetes because the money is needed to feed her family—and the Capital Health nurse leading the session responds by coaxing those dollars from her bosses. “We’re always advocating,” says Dafla.

When things go wrong, consequences ripple outward, because news spreads fast through immigrant communities, Dafla adds. “That happened with C-sections for African clients.” Word spread that doctors automatically perform caesarian sections on women whose birth canals are scarred by female genital mutilation, prompting those women to stay home until delivery was imminent, Dafla recalls. “They said, ‘Don’t go to the hospital until you know the baby’s coming, because they don’t know how to deal with us.’ And that’s a very dangerous thing to tell a mother, because if she’s in trouble, she won’t get help.”

I OFFER EVONNE EHIU, THE EDMONTON HEALTH BROKERS’ coordinator, one wave of the magic wand—one wish for Alberta’s immigrant minorities. Ever the advocate, she ups the ante to three.

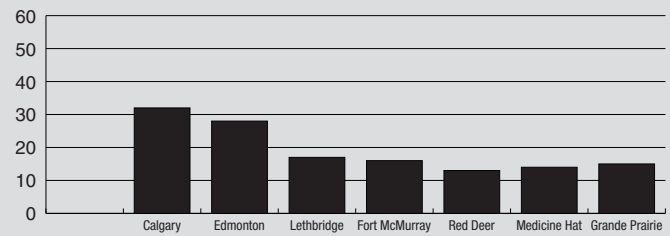
First, she wishes for an Alberta in which mainstream systems commit to newcomers as part of their core business, rather than seeing them as exceptions to the rule. “Inequities exist because systems are designed for 70 per cent of the population,” she says. “Until there’s a complete, institutional response to the segment with different life circumstances, there will still be a struggle, no matter how dedicated the frontline staff is.”

Calgary is taking a step in that direction by forming a multisector Cultural and Racial Diversity Task Force, Chiu adds; perhaps its time for Alberta and Edmonton, among others, to follow suit. Alderman Joe Ceci, who chairs the Calgary initiative, couldn’t agree more. “Toronto is now 53 per cent visible minority—I guess you could say their visible minority is the majority,” he says. “They tell us if they hadn’t started this work 20 years ago, when they were about where we are now, they would have significantly more problems today.”

The province was taking diversity seriously 20 years ago, observes the Prairie Institute’s Abu-Laban. Thanks to initiatives launched during Peter Lougheed’s tenure as premier, Alberta was once a source of inspiration—and still stands unique as a province in which second language training means not only French, but such languages as Ukrainian and Hebrew. Now, with immigration relegated to a small corner of the super-ministry called Learning, Alberta has stopped innovating and “is living on its laurels,” Abu-Laban concludes. “It’s not that the province is against diversity, but it doesn’t care. I think Alberta is missing the boat. It was built on the contributions of immigrants. Why are we taking a limited interest now?”

With her second wave of the wand, Chiu would open big-system eyes to resources within ethnic communities. People with shared values and cultures naturally band together in the hope of making things better, she notes;

Per Cent of Respondents Who Say Immigration Is Too High, 1999



Settlement Experiences of Refugees in Alberta, Prairie Centre of Excellence for Research on Immigration and Integration, with Population Research Laboratory, Nov 15, 1999.

were those efforts consistently supported, entire communities would gain confidence and strength.

As I connect with immigrant-serving agencies around the province, I realize what power that wish could unleash, for Tigist Dafla is far from alone in seeking to serve those whose roots she shares. Agencies such as Red Deer’s Central Alberta Refugee Effort (which received a citation for citizenship for 2001 from Citizenship and Immigration Canada) and Fort McMurray’s YMCA depend on newcomers as staff members and volunteers as well as clients. Then there are the natural leaders within local subcultures, who do immense work as guides, teachers and mediators. What might happen if those volunteers were equipped and financed? A two-year pilot project on family violence hints at the potential. Leaders from Edmonton’s Somali, Eritrean, Sudanese, Congolese, Chinese, Vietnamese and East Indian communities came to the table with such bodies as the John Howard Society, the Edmonton Sexual Assault Centre and Catholic Social Services. Besides building personal ties that now allow them to pick up the phone when collaboration makes sense, those leaders gained insight into each other’s concerns and constraints. For example, says Dafla, who helped facilitate the pilot, “Those mediating in the community now understand what things women cannot control once police are called and the system takes over, whereas before, those communities had been blaming the women” [for determining the fate of their assailants]. Indeed, once police are at a scene, it’s no longer up to the participants to determine whether the law can walk away without acting.

One wand wave left. This one, Chiu aims at the heart—that place where prejudice can so easily fester. All too often, we celebrate the difference between backyard bush and alpine flower, yet wall ourselves off from different human beings, she notes. “My third wish is that we learn how privileged we are to be in a culturally diverse society. Canada is such an interesting country—but it doesn’t just happen. It’s like a loving relationship in a family: we need to nurture it every day.”

Cheryl Mahaffy emigrated from the United States in 1981.



DANA WILSON

George Allam, Stella Wani and their children, Tona and Tina

George and Stella, both 28, came to Canada in 2000 as part of a large group of Sudanese refugees fleeing oppression (including slavery) and war between the Muslim government in the northern capital, Khartoum, and Christian and animist militia rebels in the south. The conflict has cost about two million lives. George and Stella have two children, Tona, 3, and Tina, six months. Since arriving in Calgary they have received language and cultural integration assistance from the Mennonite Centre for Newcomers and the Calgary Catholic Immigration Society. George works at Cargill Foods in High River and Stella stays home to take care of their young family.

George: We came to Canada in July 2000. We were part of a group. We were sponsored by the Catholic Church. The situation is not good in Sudan sometimes. Because people are not staying in a good way sometimes. Like us Christians, we do not have a right to do a lot of things. Like if you want to get work, if you want to go to school, it's difficult to go to school. So that's why we decide to go somewhere else, to be safe.

AV: Where had you been living before you came here?

George: In Egypt. For me, I have been there for four years. But my wife, I think it's one year.

AV: So you had gone to Egypt from Sudan. Was it a difficult process to be accepted into Canada?

George: Especially from Sudan, it's difficult, very difficult. That's why you have to get out from Sudan so you can get this process.

AV: Was it difficult to get to Egypt?

George: Sometimes, yeah. Like you have to use money. If you want to get visa, you have to pay money.

AV: Did you file for refugee status from Cairo? How did that work, did the church help you?

George: We applied at the UN office. When we were accepted, they sent us to the Canadian embassy.

AV: Can you tell me a little bit about your lives in Khartoum?

George: We were studying Arabic. Like from Grade 1 to Grade 12, always Arabic.

AV: What's your native language?

George: Latuca. My wife, she cannot speak Latuca, because she's not Latuca. She's from Baria, a tribe called Baria. So we have different dialect.

AV: Can you understand each other at all?

George: No. Sometimes, but I cannot understand some words from this dialects.

AV: So you need to speak to each other in Arabic.

George: In Arabic, yes.

AV: Were you working in either Sudan or Egypt?

George: In Sudan I didn't work. When I came to Egypt, I was working. But in Egypt, it's very difficult to find a

good job. You have to do anything so that you can get money. The life is really hard. I was working with a Swiss radio reporter in his house. Just cleaning the house.

AV: Tell me about coming to Canada. Did you choose Canada or was that the only choice?

George: Actually, they have choose for us. Because we want to continue our studies. That's why they give us Canada, because they said there's more education in Canada. The other countries it's too difficult to get in. Since last year we have been studying at the Mennonite Centre so that when our immigration is almost finished I have to work so that I can manage myself to rent a house, things like that.

AV: At the moment, is the government helping you...

George: No, it's finished. Since July or June. No money from the government. I have to work at Cargill Foods. In High River. I didn't buy a car yet. But I get a ride from a friend who works with us there. Every week I pay him \$25 for a ride. Now the market is poor, I think. We sometimes work, like, four days a week. Sometimes five. But in the summertime we work six days, from 2:30 [p.m.] to 1 [a.m.]. You know Cargill, it's a meat packing plant. I'm doing lips and ears. That's my job, cutting the ears and lips. We are all in a line. We are working in twos, two guys. You do the job that belongs to you and the other one goes to the other people.

AV: You don't mind this? You can handle that all right?

George: (laughs) For sure. But it's a long way driving, 40 minutes driving. Better to get work inside downtown. Anything that pays well.

AV: And you're home with your children...

Stella: (nods)

George: Home care.

AV: Tell me about what it's been like adjusting to Canada, the language change and the whole different way of living. Has it been difficult for you?

Stella: Yes.

AV: And what about the way of living? The weather...

George: It's too cold. We didn't see snow before. But it's nice.

AV: Have you met other Sudanese people here?

George: We have a lot of friends. We are not feeling lonely, because we have friends. We can call them, talk to them.

AV: Have you left family at home? What's their situation?

George: Actually it's the same situation. The situation in Sudan cannot change. It's getting worse, actually. The general life, the economy. If you are not working, you cannot eat, you cannot get school, you cannot get medicine, you cannot get anything. Sometimes we help them [our families]. We can get something, send to them, buy clothes...

AV: Would they like to come to Canada as well?

George: Of course, if we can sponsor them. They have to get out from Sudan, to Uganda or Kenya, so they can get processed from there. But from Sudan direct, it's too difficult.

AV: Why is it difficult?

George: The government, I think, they cannot allow anybody to leave.

AV: What are the things you like and don't like about Canada?

George: Education is the first one [we like]. And shopping, markets, like that. It's different than we have. Here the things we don't like are actually the snowing and the coldness. The weather is not good sometimes (laughter). We like here because it's a safe country. You don't feel as if somebody will come and beat you and come and steal your things.

AV: Do you ever feel the people here don't accept you?

George: Even in Sudan, there's bad people and there's good people. But one day, we didn't feel that these people don't like us.

AV: Who has helped you in Canada?

George: Bruce [Jackson, host volunteer with CCIS] has become a friend of the family. He comes to visit us here, talk to us about Canada. Sometimes he takes us to, like, Halloween party, Christmas parties, like that.

AV: What kinds of worries do you have?

George: No, we don't have any worries. Of course if you get a good job you can stay good. Now, if you go to work and you want to study it's difficult to get enough time. You have to choose: work or study. I have to work to give my family everything they want. But for my wife, she can go to school sometime.

AV: What would you like to study?

George: Of course, English. She [was] in university in Arabic.

AV: What were you studying?

Stella: Family science. (In Arabic, Stella explains the details to George.)

George: She can go to the families, what's going on in the family, what's their tradition and so on like that.

AV: Would that be something like what we call a social worker?

George and Stella: Yes.

AV: Would you like to do that again here when your children are older?

Stella: Yeah.

AV: Would you like to study as well?

George: I want to improve my English. That's what I need. Because I can speak English but I cannot write. I can write, but sometimes I have difficulty in spelling. That's why I want to improve. If I improve my English, I can go to college, I think.

AV: Looking ahead, what are your hopes for the future? When your children are older and you have been here a little longer, how would you like to be living?

George: We need our kids to learn, to get a good education. We don't want them to have difficulties like us. For me, I just ended high school and I didn't go on to university for some reason. We don't want our kids to get into the same situation.



DANA WILSON

Juan Santa and Rosana Luna with their son, Carlos

Self-sponsored landed immigrants, Juan, 35, and Rosana, 34, immigrated with their son Carlos, 5, to Canada from Bogota, Colombia, in March 2001. In the last decade, 40,000 people have been killed in Colombia's ongoing civil war. Colombian guerrillas, right-wing paramilitaries and drug pirates create chaos in the country.

Here Juan is taking the government-sponsored course "Work for Professional Immigrants." An industrial engineer in Colombia, here he does whatever odd jobs he can find. Rosana, trained as a speech therapist, is expecting a second child. She volunteers at her son's school.

Juan: We decided to come to Canada because in Colombia the situation is no good. It's not safe; there are a lot of problems with guerrillas. So we thought about the future of our son, and our future as well. But [above] all, our son. So we started to think about what other country could be good for our family. And we knew Canada had an opportunity [for people] with professional or different kinds of background. We decided to apply for residence in Canada about two years ago. We applied for our visa in 2000, in the Canadian embassy in Colombia. After we sent all our documents, they decided to give us our visa. The embassy said you had to have enough money to live in Canada about six months while you start to get a new job and renew life. We are our [own] sponsor, completely.

We did a lot of research about cities on the Internet. And there are a lot of possibilities. But Calgary, we think, "It's a city with one million inhabitants. It's not a big city. Toronto is a big city with maybe a lot of problems like big cities have. So Alberta is a good province with a lot of money, [the] energy [industry] and so on." We called a person that lived here, Colombian people. She told me, "It's a good city to live in."

But we needed more information about Canada before coming here. I didn't have enough information from the embassy about my career in Canada. How can I apply my background, where in Canada? I have to look for a job here; I have not got a job at this moment. We have seven months here. It's not easy to move to another province. I have been working in other jobs which are not my background. But it's no good, because I am an engineer with eight years [experience]. I have education. I have [experience]. I think I have a lot of things I can [bring] to this country. But not here in Calgary. Maybe in Calgary, but it's not easy. Maybe in Toronto, Ontario or Montreal. I have had three interviews. But it's another problem. I don't have Canadian experience.

Rosana: I'm a speech therapist, but [at] this moment I don't have the [credentials, papers]. But I hope to look for a job as an assistant. I was studying English, but now I'm not [looking for a job]. I'm pregnant and with the family

situation, it is difficult.

Juan: The life here is good. [Except] with work. We miss our work. We miss a lot of things. Our food, our parties, our friends.

Rosana: Families.

Juan: It's normal, I think.

Rosana: In Colombia, we had everything.

Juan: No certainty, maybe no future...

AV: Do you regret your decision to come here?

Rosana and Juan: (much laughter) Not yet. We are trying not to. We have to fight every day.

Juan: We are confident that we can fit in this country. Our idea is to keep our fight going because we've found a lot of good things here: a good level of life, peace, good people, infrastructure, the city, good transportation, good streets. It's good!

AV: Have you experienced any discrimination?

Rosana and Juan: No.

Juan: Only...the language. It's not discrimination, but it's hard when you can't say all you want to say because you don't have enough English. When I have an interview [for a job], I know a lot of things, but it's not easy to say them.

Rosana: I love this country...but not the weather (laughter). In summer, it's nice. But I am pregnant. I need strength for the winter. My son goes to Collingwood Elementary. It's the first school in Canada with immersion in Spanish. I'm happy because Carlos is learning perfectly his Spanish along with his English.

Juan: We thought it's good that Carlos doesn't forget his roots. He learns to write Spanish. English is easy for him, because all his classmates and his friends speak English. But it's easy for him to forget Spanish, after five or 10 years. So this is a good option.

We have Canadian citizen friends, like Elizabeth [the family's host volunteer through the Calgary Catholic Immigration Society], like Roberto. We met Roberto in a gym. He's a big person, a good friend. We are interested in getting Canadian friends, to learn about Canadian things. We attend church and we know some people there.

Rosana: When [I] want to speak to someone in English, it's difficult, because in Spanish I like to speak. All the time (laughs)! The mother's group classmates, one of the moms tells me, "Come to my house. I would like to talk to you." But I think it's hard.

Juan: But in time this huge wall will start to fall down. I don't know how many months or years. In Colombia, we went to the movie, to dance at the discothèque. We spent a lot of time with family. Parties.

Rosana: But in Canada, we exercise all the time.

Juan: When we lived in Colombia we don't have a lot of time to go the gym every day because you get up early in the morning and come back to your house late in the afternoon. But in Canada, you have better lifestyle. You go to work and come back at 4:00 or 5:00. You have time to go to the gym, to swim or whatever. In Colombia you get

home about 7:00. I spent about 1-1/2 hours commuting each way every day. The swimming pool is not near to your house. In Calgary, there are a lot of swimming pools in [our] area. In Colombia, we went to different places every weekend. We would have lunch with all the family. Now we can't go for lunch on the weekend. We don't have enough money to pay. Calgary is better than Bogota, a big city with a lot of problems, a lot of criminals.

Rosana: I enjoy this city. Carlos went to the swimming pool today for his swim class. He loves it. He loves the snow too.

Juan: We don't mind the snow when it's coming from the sky. But after three days... (laughs). But that's part of the life here. It's hard to live, the weather is cold. But it's not a big problem. The big problem here is in starting to work.

AV: Have you had difficulties, renting a place, getting medical insurance and so on?

Juan: I think it's the same as in Colombia. But [here] you don't know places, you don't know people, you don't know language, you don't know anything. The first day, for instance, I need telephone. How can I get telephone? Okay, you can call the telephone company. How can I call the telephone company? I don't speak English. Okay, I call and the machine start to speak. Press 1. Press 2. Machine, machine all the time. Maybe if I'd talked to a person, I could say, "Okay, I need to connect my phone."

Rosana: And the medical system is different. In Canada, if you're pregnant, you go to family doctor. In Colombia, you go to the gynecologist [right away]. Not after six or seven months. It's different.

Juan: For us, it's better in Colombia. For us. Because we had enough money to pay. But for other people, they didn't have money to pay—it's bad. So it's good in Canada because all people can use the health system. Maybe you have a lot of money, but you have to go to family doctor, wait for two or three months for a specialist.

Colombia is not a safe country. Each time the situation is harder and harder. You could lose your job because the economy is just going down. We thought about it for about two years before we decided to come. But not just for ourselves. Because what's the future? If right now it's so difficult, what's it like in ten years?

But you have the option to go back if you want. You've lost a lot of money. You've lost time. And Canada has lost as well. But I think it's not easy to make the decision to go back. It's harder.

Our dream? It's not a huge dream. We think about getting a good job. We want to see our family grown up—our son—and we are waiting for another child. After we get a job here, buying a house. A car. And work for this country. Because we think if we work for Canada, Canada will be a better country every day. So if all immigrants come and work hard for this country, this country will be better all the time. And [with] what we bring, we receive a good living ourselves and our children grow up happy here.