

London Magazine

Settling In

By Suzanne Boles

Darius Baheri moves forward in his chair, his strong voice is punctuated with brief hesitations as he searches for appropriate expressions. Reliving his first years in Canada -- a place he calls home since receiving refugee status in 1985 -- the Iranian native details the events that led him to his job as a settlement counsellor at the London Cross Cultural Learner Centre (CCLC).

"It's very difficult to be a newcomer. At the beginning, it was the only place you can go, he says of CCLC. "It's very painful if you don't work. And the question is even worse - 'what do you do for a living'? You have to provide some answer to some people to convince them that you're o.k."

Baheri, his wife and two sons initially settled in Timmins, Ont. But lack of access to agencies for newcomers was a barrier in the smaller community. A year later the family moved to London. Baheri credits CCLC for helping him find the resources and gain the confidence he needed to find employment. "I found that at the centre they accept you for what you really are. Very soon you feel that you are a part of it. You're not an outsider."

Educated in the field of social work, Baheri worked for the settlement program of Iraqi refugees in Iran. In Canada, he managed to find odd jobs and began volunteering for CCLC, speaking to school children about his experiences and helping other refugees. In 1988, he applied for a settlement counsellor position at CCLC where he has been working since that time.

"Newcomers come here and they want nothing but to get a job and become contributing members of the community," explains Mary Williamson, CCLC coordinator. "One of the biggest barriers for employment for newcomers is the lack of Canadian work experience. As a volunteer, Darius gained a lot of that experience. We probably have, right now, 500 volunteers who participate at this level."

London's CCLC began as a concept for global education in the 1960s through the efforts of volunteers who had served in third world countries. Their experiences were brought home in the form of educating citizens about the practices of peace, justice and international development.

"It was trying to sensitize our community around the global issues -- what was happening outside our borders," says Williamson. "We got into refugee resettlement in the mid 70s and that's grown. It's become a very large part of the work of the centre."

Today, CCLC serves approximately 3,000 clients a year. Of those, 1,000 are new clients. Previously limited to government-sponsored refugees, the mandate has expanded to include assistance to all immigrants. Seven full-time settlement counsellors work one-on-one with

clients. Their expertise can accommodate 25 to 30 different languages and cultural backgrounds. This is further expanded by volunteers.

The majority of funding for the programs comes from the federal government -- Citizenship and Immigration Canada. Additional monies are provided by a number of sources including Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), municipal and provincial governments, donations, memberships and a recent partnership with the London YM/YWCA. In an effort to meet ongoing funding reductions some restructuring is taking place. Presently operating from four different locations, the administrative offices and library, on Dundas Street, will be moving to Global House this summer. The building, located nearby, is owned by CCLC.

The centre works closely with other community institutions, agencies and organizations to help newcomers access the services they need. Resources are also available to the community. "We have resources here and our resources are resources for the community," says Williamson. "We'll be glad to help any agency, organization -- help them to understand, to either work in, or trade in, or do business in a multicultural community."

Education is still a strong thrust of CCLC. Other programs and resources include a large reference library, volunteer host program, community outreach, ESL training, and Global House, which provides temporary accommodation for government-sponsored refugees.

Williamson expresses concern about barriers which presently target new immigrants to Canada. "Right now, with all the economic/socioeconomic problems that we're experiencing there's a lot of backlash. I know there are a number of supporters of closing the door to Canada until we're economically in a situation where we can accommodate and have jobs for immigrants. A lot of people look at the cost alone and not at the benefits. So I guess that's our biggest job right now -- to make sure that they understand the value. Immigrants aren't here taking, they're giving, but we just haven't figured out a way to value what they're giving or to prove the value of what they're contributing to our country."

As a settlement counsellor, Baheri works closely with newcomers. He helps them understand how to assimilate into their new culture and is sensitive to their needs with first-hand understanding their frustrations.

"I am beside them day and night and there are many times they're agonizing and having trouble -- Dariush is a good friend from the centre. If they have crisis, if they have difficulty understanding, if they are desperate, if they can't find jobs -- then Dariush is there. That is my love, and that is what I do."