

Canadian Stories:

Building a Life in Canada



When Luketa M'Pintou first moved to Quebec City from Zaire at the age of 24, the last thing on his mind was volunteering. "I had all the friends and social activities I needed," he says.

Later, when he was seeking refugee status, working part-time, and studying for his MBA in Montreal, he didn't have much time for volunteer work. "My main focus was survival."

It's a strange turn of events that Luketa is now a leader in Alberta's voluntary sector. He is Alberta's representative on the Citizenship and Immigration committee on francophones in minority situations. And he has recently been chosen director of the Western and Northern regions of the federation of francophone and Acadian communities. "That took some work, to gain the trust needed to obtain that position," he says.

Luketa made his name by founding and directing an Edmonton-based settlement organization for young francophone immigrants and their families. Having just celebrated the fifth anniversary of the Alliance Jeunesse-Famille de l'Alberta Society (AJFAS), he is now a passionate proponent of volunteerism among immigrant Canadians.

"I tell them that getting involved will create a network for them," he says. "They can succeed, by getting involved."

His own story bears him out. He originally came to Alberta looking for the polished English that would allow him to put his hard-earned MBA to use. He pursued that goal by studying English and volunteering in the overwhelmingly anglophone legislature for many months.

But he didn't find his vocation until he offered to lend a hand organizing the tenth anniversary of Alberta's multicultural association. Noting that no sessions were planned on youth, he stepped up to the plate. The speech he gave on Congolese youth in Canadian society caught the attention of many people and it has since been published. Within the year, Luketa had obtained a small grant to start his organization.

"We started with a \$37,000 grant. Now we have over \$200,000 a year in funding, and four employees."

Luketa is now mentoring other young immigrants in leadership roles. The AJFAS sponsored Congolese-born teenager Rachel Thinymbe to attend the national consultations of the Commission for UNESCO. She was then elected to represent all of Canada with the Commission.

“I offer Rachel’s example to other youth, to encourage them,” he says.

But Luketa is also aware of the barriers facing immigrant youth, especially those from African countries such as Haiti, the Congo, Rwanda and Cameroon, who make up the majority of his organization’s membership.

“Volunteerism is not really encouraged in African communities,” he says. “When immigrants arrive, they don’t have the time or energy to volunteer. They are typically working three jobs – even the kids are often working every day after school, and on Saturdays.”

His organization does what it can to work around those constraints. “We find ways to attract and motivate them – we meet in restaurants; we organize excursions,” he says.

But as long as immigrants are pushed to the limit by hard work and low incomes, he believes it will only be a minority who can find a way to get involved. “It’s something that really needs to be looked at – how immigrants can make more money and have more free time to get involved when they come to Canada.”

Young immigrants from Africa also face other barriers. “They often encounter a lot of troubles integrating into the society. Racism creates obstacles for them in the community, especially at school and at work.”

He was glad to see the North Edmonton school board create a school-community liaison officer. “I think that the existence of our organization encouraged them to address the issue. “

“But,” he says, “there’s still a lot of work to be done to open the minds of employers in this province.”

He is aware that these difficulties can lead to anti-social responses. “We try to draw youth in our community into positive involvement in society, away from illegal activities,” he says. “Those who do get involved have a sense of pride.”

And he is very grateful for the many volunteers who overcame all these challenges and helped build his organization.

“There is a saying in my country: ‘You can’t wash your face with just one finger.’ It was thanks to volunteers that I was able to build this organization.”