

Canadian Stories:

Organizing Ourselves



CANADIAN
COUNCIL
ON SOCIAL
DEVELOPMENT

In a city where immigrants volunteer much less, on average, than their Canadian-born counterparts, Bashir Hussain bucks the trend.

This semi-retired accountant, originally from Pakistan, volunteers eight hours a day, seven days a week, at the offices of the Alliance of South Asian Communities (ASAC) in Montreal.

He is clearly proud of the organization, which he founded in 1998. He figured that the 120,000 South Asians in Quebec would do better if they collaborated, so he convinced Indian, Bangladeshi, and Sri Lankan community leaders to co-found the ASAC.

He is now executive director of the organization, which has one full-time paid staff person and many South Asian volunteers.

“Many people come in to help,” he says. “I am unique in volunteering so much, but many people come in for an hour a week, or 10 hours a week.”

Volunteers often help other South Asians with French-language interpretation (since most are English-educated), computer courses, housing, old age, advocacy with various levels of government, and basic

needs. “We provide all sorts of help,” says Bashir.

He has personally spent a great deal of time helping poverty-stricken retired immigrants. “I advocate with landlords for rent reductions. I’ll write to their city counsellor and tell them they are a desirable candidate for supported housing. I help them fill out the forms, and get them hooked into some of the programs that exist in the city.”

The ASAC also provides cultural outreach, especially to the schools.

“Schools call us to see if we can arrange for an elderly lady to come to the school and talk about the Ramadan feast, for example, to show the kids how it’s done.” Bashir says he works very closely with a number of schools in the area, and the school administrators are very happy with the arrangement.

But he is pessimistic that attitudes towards South Asians will improve anytime soon. “In 1998, the Quebec government did a survey which showed that the least-tolerated immigrants are South Asians,” he says.

Bashir believes that discrimination plays an important role in the difficulties that skilled South Asians experience trying to integrate into the Canadian job market.

“Take an accountant from Pakistan,” he says. “Two plus two still equals four; it’s the same balance sheet. But employers say they need ‘Canadian’ experience.”

He is particularly concerned about the wave of South Asians who moved to Canada after September 11th, when their American working papers were not renewed. Most cannot find jobs, even though they are skilled and experienced professionals, he says.

His organization is trying to shift policies and attitudes towards immigrant employment. “We attend every conference, we raise every problem,” he says.

It frustrates him that federal budgets for multiculturalism have been repeatedly cut. “It puts organizations at a disadvantage – very few have actual offices any more, and that makes it harder for volunteers to get involved.”

Bashir has kept the offices of the ASAC open through sheer determination and a keen eye for funding sources. He has been frustrated by arduous application processes – “They give you the run-around for two-and-a-half years,” he says. But he has always managed to unearth some sources of funding.

He is currently launching a program supported by the Community Mobilization

Fund, which will help the children of immigrants stay in high school, resist drugs and other illegal activities, and get involved in leadership within their communities.

A survey conducted by the ASAC showed that South Asian youth tend to drop out for reasons similar to those of their Canadian counterparts – drugs, poverty, troubled relationships with teachers and other students. But Bashir feels that communications between foreign-born parents and Canadian-born children may play a role.

In the past, the ASAC has had trouble getting teenagers involved as volunteers, especially during the school year. “They have a lot of homework, and they want to have time for themselves,” he says. When his own children were in high school, he would resort to saying, “Come on, let’s go and just do something for half an hour, and God will give you the reward...”

Now his organization is planning a seminar on youth leadership and will send youth who show promise to provide leadership training in other South Asian communities.

“As a community, we have to organize ourselves, and that is what we are doing,” he says.