

Canadian Stories:

Finding a New Direction



Three months after she moved from Columbia to Nova Scotia with her six-year-old daughter, Carmen Moncayo started volunteering at the Canadian Mental Health Association in Halifax.

A practicing psychologist in her home country, she faced a long and expensive process to obtain her Canadian accreditation. Before embarking on it, however, she decided to try a little volunteer work “to understand how the mental health system worked in Canada.”

It was the best thing she could have done. The work made Carmen feel validated at a time when she couldn’t practice her profession and was still struggling to learn English.

“The volunteer coordinator, who was a psychologist herself, treated me with such respect,” she says. “I felt useful.”

Volunteer work also clarified her career direction – and spared her the trouble of recertification. “I realized that I was not really interested in individual counselling anymore. What I really wanted to do was social work,” she says, “and for that, you don’t need to be certified.”

Buoyed by this realization, Carmen took a step into her newly identified profession by volunteering with the Metropolitan Immigrant Settlement Association (MISA).

“It was something completely new for me,” she says. But it also offered something familiar: “It gave me regular hours, a routine,” she says. “That was important. Especially in the summer, when the schools were closed. It stopped my days from being blank.”

MISA’s volunteer coordinator invited Carmen to several conferences on women’s rights. “She gave me information that was very useful to me, and I met people working in the field.” Soon, Carmen was helping organize the World March of Women in the Atlantic region. In 2001, MISA hired Carmen as their Family Violence and Cross Cultural Awareness Co-ordinator.

It doesn’t surprise Carmen that immigrants in the Atlantic volunteer more hours than do Canadian-born residents. “It’s the only way to make friends, the only way to get known,” she says. Her first two work references came from volunteer work.

Carmen believes that the relatively low proportion of immigrants in Halifax makes it even more important for them to reach out to the wider community through volunteering. Immigrants represent only 7% of the Halifax population, compared to 18% in Montreal, 37% in Vancouver, and 44% in Toronto.

But as a single mother and a staff member of an organization which employs more than 300 volunteers, she also sees barriers to voluntary sector participation for some new immigrants.

“Some mothers can’t volunteer because of the huge problem we have here in Halifax with child care – or lack of it.”

And she points out another, more subtle barrier to participation. She and some of her friends have hesitated to volunteer for certain kinds of work because they see it as “the government giving up its responsibility for core services.”

And finally, there is the barrier of poor volunteer management. Carmen offers the example of a friend who volunteered in an office, where she “just filled in boxes all day. Nobody talked to her – it was exploitive.”

“Volunteers don’t stick around in those kinds of jobs for long,” she says. “Those who are appreciated and supported, do stay.”

Nowhere is mutual support more evident than within the immigrant communities themselves. Asked what she thought of one study’s finding that 100% of immigrants in Halifax contribute to charity, Carmen described an incident where a recent immigrant from Kosovo had tragically died in an accident. “The whole community got together and raised money for her family,” she says.

“When solidarity is needed, people respond.”