

# Canadian Stories:

## Keeping Faith



Huiling Hong moved from mainland China to Vancouver in November 1999, because she wanted “a better quality of life” and “dreamt of doing something between the two cultures.”

Five and a half years later, at the age of 45, this single mother with a teenaged son was hired as a Settlement Program Officer at SUCCESS, a well-known social service agency helping immigrants in Vancouver adapt to Canadian society.

“This is part of my dream – I’m doing it,” says Huiling, who has now adopted the Canadian name Faith. “I feel excited because this is something I can really put myself into.”

Along the way, Faith took on an unanticipated new career in volunteering.

Her first experience came just a week after her arrival in Canada. While registering her 14-year-old son for high school, she realized that some of the other Chinese parents were having a terrible time trying to make themselves understood. She stepped in and volunteered her professional interpretation services to help another family through the registration process.

Not that the language was easy for her. “The living English language was totally different from what I was used to. I couldn’t communicate as well as I thought I could!”

Faith was shocked to discover that she couldn’t find a professional job right away. She had anticipated an easy transition, since she had substantial professional and cross-cultural experience: in China, she had taught Chinese and

English at a university, she had coordinated a foreign student exchange program, and worked with a private company to promote foreign investment in China.

During her first year in Canada, Faith pieced together service jobs – working in a bar, teaching a little Chinese at a local community centre – and continued to take small steps in volunteering.

She began helping with registration and office work at MOSAIC, an immigrant settlement association which had organized a ‘welcome session’ during her first month after arriving. “Laurie Winter, the volunteer coordinator, was the first Canadian I knew,” she says.

With help from a UBC program on personal development and vocational testing, Faith decided to go back to school for a one-year counselling diploma, then volunteer more systematically in areas where she wanted to work.

Now equipped with the diploma and a few teaching and interpretation jobs to support herself, she started a new volunteer job at MOSAIC, this time providing one-on-one counselling to people on welfare. She also offered administrative assistance in case management to the Immigrant Services Society, and worked in cross-cultural education for the Canadian Mental Health Association, “helping new immigrants to fit in and understand the stresses they will face.”

She also volunteered briefly with the Salvation Army, in a program for Aborigines. Although she says it was “a nice experience which helped

me learn about Aboriginal culture,” she decided not to continue with it because there was no opportunity to use her counselling skills.

“In volunteering, it’s very important to focus on your goals,” she says.

Pursuing another job-finding tactic, Faith went for an information interview with SUCCESS. It didn’t land her employment, but she was offered a two-morning per week volunteer position with the title of Volunteer Employment Counsellor.

All that hard work and perseverance finally paid off. One of the staff at SUCCESS told her that a paid position was coming open, and encouraged her to apply. “I gave them all the references from my volunteer work,” she says. In February, she was hired as a full-time Settlement Program Officer at SUCCESS.

But Faith’s involvement in volunteering doesn’t stop there. For one thing, her employer depends on 6,000 volunteers to deliver the agency programs. Now a volunteer coordinator herself, Faith speaks enthusiastically about those who come in to help: “Many are professionals, they have their own companies, and are very well trained. I learn a lot from them!”

“They are really helpful,” she adds. “It’s like a family.”

She says the positive atmosphere at SUCCESS helps attract and retain volunteers. “We encourage people, especially the brand new immigrants, and do a kind of case management

with them. We know that volunteering will be a good way to get them involved in the new culture.”

Faith insists that it is important for newly arrived immigrants from China to not only volunteer within their own communities, but also to reach beyond. “On the one hand, we have to get close to our own community,” she says. “On the other, we need to integrate into the new culture.”

In any case, she says, the notion of an ethnic culture can be rather illusory. “Sometimes people we call Chinese – people from Taiwan, Hong Kong, and the mainland – can actually be quite different.”

Faith is now perfecting her Cantonese skills, and continues putting her enthusiasm for cross-cultural communication to use in volunteer work. She is getting ready to offer her monthly workshop at the Canadian Mental Health Association, which draws out the feelings immigrants have about adapting to a new culture.

“We suggest topics for people to talk about, to see where they are at mentally, and introduce North American theories and knowledge,” she says. “That part is really exciting, because they always want to learn more.”

Faith’s route to her chosen career was an arduous one, but she recommends it whole-heartedly to others. “I hope more immigrants will follow this route and like me, get involved in volunteering, because that could lead to the job they want.”