

Reframing Success: Immigrant Women as “Entrepreneurs”

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Table of Contents

CHAPTER	PAGE
Acknowledgements	3
Introduction	4
Abstract	5
Context	6
Making The Passage — Facing Challenges	7
The Interviews	8
Conclusion	15
References	17
Appendix 1	18
Appendix 2	19

Acknowledgements

The Toronto Training Board (TTB) is a not-for-profit organization governed by a volunteer Board of Directors representing business, labour, education and training, women, persons with disabilities, immigrants and racial minorities and youth. The Toronto Training Board's mission is to be a catalyst for training solution grounded in research and guided by multi-stakeholder perspectives. Enriketa Dushi, an immigrant from Albania who led the training programs in the Albanian financial sector, wrote this report. Enriketa came to the TTB as a placement student from the Humber College Public Administration Program.

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Introduction

In January 2006, the Toronto Training Board in collaboration with the Working Women Community Centre decided to examine immigrant women as “entrepreneurs”. The objective of this research was to shed light on the skills’ sets that immigrant women rely on to achieve success and to demonstrate that these skills are very similar in each and every case.

The research sought to learn from the experiences of immigrant women who are leaders by virtue of their accomplishments in the Toronto labour market. This report explores and provides recognition of the success immigrant women have achieved from a number of different perspectives as community leaders, labour organizers, entrepreneurs, and motivational educators.

The research tells the stories of nine extraordinary women. Community leaders, successful entrepreneurs, motivational educators and labour activists were among the prominent women interviewed. These women overcame obstacles and used the wisdom and skills gained to create something new in their lives. Their skills were transferable to a new set of circumstances dictated by the immigrant experience and they were able to use their skills to achieve success.

Abstract

Whether disenchanted with trying to break the glass ceiling, motivated by the need to achieve or confident in their ability to drive a dream to reality, many immigrant women are vital participants in the economy of Toronto through paid and unpaid work. Their passage to Canada and choice of Toronto was a journey that challenged their abilities and forced these women to rethink and reframe the definition of success.

How do immigrant women make their passage? What skills do they use to become successful “entrepreneurs”? What kinds of social and economic linkages do they forge? How are they empowered? Can success be measured by contribution rather than numbers? These questions are fundamental to any understanding of immigrant women’s contributions to the Toronto economy. This research attempts to answer the above questions through a qualitative analysis of nine interviews. The paper concludes with a summary of the traits and skills that make the female immigrant a successful entrepreneur.

Context

For the host countries immigration can be an important source of labour supply. It can act as a demographic factor rejuvenating the population and it can provide substantial talent and motivation in the form of human capital. Canada is a nation of immigrants and “it is their aspirations, hopes and dreams as well as their willingness to work towards making those dreams real that has built this nation.”¹

Research has shown that immigrants are naturally entrepreneurial.² Entrepreneurship warrants particular attention because it has long been viewed as a significant contributor to economic development.³ Among the many reasons for this entrepreneurial spirit of women is that the immigrant woman is likely to have many of the same qualities as the entrepreneur one.

Making The Passage — Facing Challenges

Our research method focused on individual immigrant women's experiences in order to gain an understanding of their concrete barriers to integration as well as their strategies in overcoming them. This paper analyses the lived experiences of woman who immigrated to Toronto. The focus is on providing a picture of their perceived stressors and supports as related to their immigration experience. Three major themes of the sources and contexts of stress emerged from their narratives and qualitative data analyses of their responses.

Women experienced many challenges and stressors surrounding their work in the daily living of settling in, in their quest for ethnic continuity, and in their attempts to enter the labour market. Daily they encountered a multitude of personal, professional, cultural, and career challenges.

The Interviews

Immigrant women often make personal sacrifices to achieve their goals. These women readily discussed their experiences and the sacrifices they made. Once in Canada, much of their personal time was spent catering to the demands placed on them by family, friends, and their community rather than pursuing careers or educational goals.

Still, they agreed that overcoming these very basic barriers made it possible to move past their initial, inevitable sense of isolation and achieve the dreams that brought them to Canada.

Changing Career Goals

Faduma Mohamed immigrated from Somalia. This married mother of three had a Masters Degree in agriculture from a university in Germany. She had just started her PhD, doing research in her native Somalia, when the civil war broke out. She and her children fled to Kenya, then to Germany, and ultimately found herself, her three kids and her husband in Canada as refugees. Once here, she wanted to continue working on her PhD. *“My expectation was that at least my Masters Degree of agriculture would be recognized here, and that I could work in my field or related areas.”* Faduma admits.

When she went to the office of Comparative Education at U of T, she was told that her degree would not be recognized in Canada. Faced with the decision of whether to modify her education or to just settle for a job unrelated to her post-secondary education, she chose to find work, any kind of work.

“I didn’t go back to school because we had to survive; we had to pay for everything and we didn’t want to stay on welfare. I never even bothered to follow up to see if I can go back to university. I was really being realistic in saying if I have to go back to university, how are we going to survive financially?”⁴

Today, Faduma is the Executive Director of the Labour Community Services of Toronto and York Region Labour Council. She brought her organizing skills into the labour movement. She has been encouraging others to fight for social justice, equity and access since she settled in Toronto. In 2004, Faduma was a recipient of the Person’s Day Award from the City of Toronto, which honours women who have made significant contributions to society, and have advanced the standing of women in Toronto.

Kay Blair arrived in Canada in 1976, young, married, and the mother of one child. It wasn’t long before she was divorced with two children. She experienced many challenges in order to find meaningful employment. Those years were crucial in shaping her character. She had to make new friends, raise two children, and build a career without the support and guidance of an extended family. However she found family support within various communities of women.

“Immigrant women are extremely skilled at realizing the supports they need. Women know what is required to move towards their goals, based on the issue they are dealing with. They understand very well that certain people and systems will support them while others will not. Their ability to make emotional connections, and see the value in things around

them, enables them to identify the supports they need.”

Kay's original career goal was to become a lawyer. In 1987 she was admitted into the law school but could not accept the offer.

“At that time, my choices were between getting an education, and providing food and shelter for my children, the same situation faced by many women. Such a choice is really no choice at all, and instead of enrolling in law school, I continued to work three jobs (shelter administrator, counsellor, and part-time hotel clerk)”.

In 2002 she returned to university to complete an MBA with a specialization in organizational leadership. She is now working on her PhD while working full-time as the Executive Director of MicroSkills. Kay was named a YMCA Woman of Distinction in Community Leadership in 2006.

Pursuing Educational Opportunities

Education opportunities are another aspect that contribute to a successful integration. The fact that immigrant skills are sometimes discounted in the contemporary labour market forced these women to pursue alternatives to expanding their education.

Maria Plachta immigrated from Poland to Canada in 1990. Maria was a teacher in Poland and Germany. At the time she came to Canada she did not speak English and thought that her husband would get a job and she would learn English. But it did not happen this way. She gave herself 6 weeks to learn English and three months after coming to Canada she found herself in front of a classroom. Teaching was the profession she loved. It was actually her ESL teacher who helped her to become a volunteer. She volunteered for a whole school year, learned about the system and looked around for opportunities to fit in the system.

Eventually the combination of experience, volunteer work and the formal education Maria received in Canada opened doors. Maria has become a successful teacher by being innovative. She has been experimenting her entire life and continues to do so. Although she has been teaching the same subject for many years she has not been teaching it the same way. Every year she introduces something new. This year she has created a new subject that does not even exist in the Ontario curriculum but there is a possibility of offering it into the interdisciplinary courses. It combines philosophy, mathematics, physics and computer science. Students love the subject and she loves teaching it. Maria has also introduced enriched courses that are specific and unique to her school. When she decides to do something she never gives up and that's another trait that helped her make a successful passage. When something appears in her way she perceives it as a challenge not as an obstacle.

Zahra Parvinian, Team Manager at Food Share, immigrated from Iran to Canada as a political refugee. Zahra has a degree from one of the most well known universities in the Middle East. An activist on women's and labour issues in Iran, Zahra continued to be active on such issues after arriving in Canada. Here, she had two choices: to work in a coffee shop or to follow the path of her dreams. A single mother raising two children, she continued to work on her English skills, which she saw as crucial to her success in the new country. She enrolled in some courses on community education at George Brown College.

“There are many, many obstacles for immigrant women, but in order to overcome them

you should have a strong personality. The immigration process killed four years of my life. I arrived in 1988 and got the status of political refugee in 1992. I was working and paying taxes, but was not able to get a loan to go to the University. If you do not integrate talented people into the Canadian society, you will lose them one day. Because I was a goal-oriented person those barriers did not stop me”

In 1994 she began studying at York University and in 1995 she started working part time at Food Share. Not satisfied with her status after graduation, as she was still considered a political refugee, Zahra applied to a Masters’ Degree program. It was very hard at that time to be approved. The number was limited to only 16 persons but she was accepted.

In an attempt to identify the keys to her success Zahra was asked whether somebody helped her through the passage.

“It was me, just me — says Zahra — I had it. I came with a middle class mentality. I was aware of the kind of life I wanted to live. I did not want to live on social services forever. I remained positive all the time. I’m going to make it; I’m going to make it. All the steps of my life were a struggle. Although I am a successful woman, a manager in a not for profit organization, I still struggle day by day.”

Zahra appreciates the help of many good friends in Canada because they kept her sane: “I came with the intention of being an activist and in the process of helping others I received back lots of help. When you help you get something back informally because it is a cycle. I believe in the cycle of giving and taking.”

Being an ambitious woman, she wants to see herself at a higher role in society. Working for Food Share gives her a lot more freedom to think and bring her own ideas forward.

“Most of the time my ideas are accepted. This is more important for me than a higher salary. This does not mean that I do not care about money. Yes, I do care about money because I have to pay a mortgage, I have to pay bills and support the family. I find a balance between what satisfies me as a person and what can I do to the society. For that I have to sacrifice a higher salary.”

Facing Reality

Immigrants encounter daunting barriers in their attempts to find jobs that are meaningful and appropriate to their qualifications, training and work experience. Among these barriers are the non-recognition of foreign credentials, linguistic difficulties, limited networks, and lack of ‘Canadian experience’. Some women stated that they had to be willing to face reality and find the strength to overcome numerous difficulties in order to survive in a strange place.

For **Ira Metani**, the transition to the Canadian job market was more difficult than she anticipated. Ira arrived in Canada from Albania in 2003 with a wealth of experience and qualifications. After her arrival she immediately set about the task of getting a job. She had a long road ahead.

“It was a great risk to leave one’s home, culture and jobs. Nothing is free nor are there shortcuts in life. Success is not measured by wealth and fame alone, but also by how far one has advanced from her or his situation, regardless of what position they are in and how much money they make”

Despite her experience as an English Language Instructor at Tirana University, Faculty of Foreign Languages and a Masters Degree in education, she could not find work. After applying for a number of positions she waited to hear about interviews. Every time she would pick up the phone the same question was asked: Do you have any Canadian experience?

The lack of Canadian work experience didn't leave many options, but she tried to always be optimistic. Her dream was to become a teacher, given her experience and education in Albania.

“Wishing is a very easy thing to do, succeeding is not. Anyone who tells you that all of your dreams can come true without your hard work and effort is full of it. There is no such thing as an overnight success. Learning, growing, becoming more has always meant for me willingness to take risks.”

She had to work hard towards her certification as a teacher and she was able to successfully complete this program and become a teacher.

Sheryl Nestel grew up in Los Angeles and received her undergraduate education at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). Between 1974 and 1988, Nestel lived in Israel and returned with her family to Canada in 1988. In order to find satisfactory work she decided to complete a Ph.D. in Sociology at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto. Although her story is a bit different from that of the other women, she admits that there were lots of ups and downs in her passage.

“Thankfully I never really felt the experience of being an immigrant. I cannot compare my transition to the experience of immigrants coming from other countries, especially in terms of language and cultural barriers. I knew what I was going to do when I came here, even though I did some skill upgrading. I immediately got work and went to the top. It is obvious that the doors are open when you are white, an English speaker and you know the culture.”

From Sheryl's perspective the most successful people are those who have the closest connections to the native born Canadians.

“There is a kind of knowledge that needs to be acquired and cannot be acquired within your group, but only out of the group. Immigrants struggle tremendously to get that kind of knowledge and information. The things that people do to survive economically and socially are just extraordinary. People struggle bit by bit. They know that they can get there and are positive all the time. That is the most important element of becoming successful”

Sheryl has focused her research on a very specific feminist initiative — the movement to revive the practice of midwifery in Ontario, Canada. Her research untangles the paradox represented by the conspicuous under-representation of immigrant midwives of colour in the ranks of the province's newly legalized midwifery profession. Many immigrant women she interviewed inspired her research.

Surviving Economically and Socially

Sometimes overcoming the many obstacles of immigrating to a new country can provide the necessary skills to start a new venture. Not unexpectedly, some of the women entered the area of business after a discouraging experience in the traditional labour market, where they confronted barriers. They felt they wanted to be the one in control and they could not find this outside of entrepreneurship. They were motivated by a

sense of adventure and a desire to make a better living for themselves. The two businesswomen who were interviewed were doing something that they felt gave them control over their future.

Christina Zachemski, an immigrant from Poland and owner of “Ideal Mattress”, set her course:

“I worked for a company and I did not like the way they were dealing with their customers. I was convinced that I could do things better. So I took the opportunity and opened my own company. It is 10 years now that I am operating this business. I am successful and happy too, although it is a business kind of thing with its ups and downs.”

When she decided to open her business she tried to get money from a bank or government agency. She was turned down. Through self-motivation she was able to survive the ups and downs of self-employment. Everything rested on her shoulders from thinking where to get the money to fund the business, to developing the product, to determining how to reach the customer. She had to be smart enough to know when she needed to go ahead, and when to stop. For Christina, success in business is not limited to those who have tons of capital in the beginning. A self-starter with a clear desired goal in mind she had confidence in herself, and in her ideas. She was willing to focus her energy and worked hard towards each and every step that made her business a success.

“Business is like a marriage. If you are committed to go on in your business, it makes you stronger.” says Christina. She had that extra drive and commitment to make sure that she was taking the necessary steps to make her dream of a successful business a reality. Today her business is growing rapidly. She successfully manages two big stores, one in Toronto and the other one in Mississauga.

Elga Nicolova came in Canada in 2000. She did a lot of research while she was still back in Bulgaria. She had a strategy. She looked at her skills and tried to find out which of these skills could be really transferable. Somehow she identified a niche for herself to begin with. “It was probably just sheer luck, but it worked.” says Elga.

In Bulgaria she helped local people to change their approach to job search so that they could fit into the western companies that started coming to that country. She believed that using the same strategy with newcomers to Canada could help them adapt to job search process and learn the work place reality of a western country. She started as an information officer at an employment resource centre with 95% of clients being new immigrants.

“In my darkest moments it was always the faith that things will work out. I just need to take a step at a time. I was not afraid to start from the bottom and do whatever it takes. Setting my ego aside, I started my first job as a telemarketer. I did not feel bad at all because it was a very conscious decision. I knew why I had chosen it. I knew why I was doing it and where it would take me. I didn’t feel forced because of the circumstances, in any way.”

Elga will never forget the way the Executive Director of a very small organisation serving immigrants compared the passage of an immigrant.

This passage looks like a letter “j”. Before you immigrate you are at the top. When you decide to immigrate you start going down, until you go to the bottom. Then you start going up again. As an immigrant there is no limit to how far you can go. You have to accept that you will be at the bottom first. If you try to take shortcuts the system will kick you and life will kick you back to where you started from and it will force you to go to the bottom. And

the bottom is different for everyone but there is a bottom. People who take shortcuts are people who do not want to accept reality.”

Elga believes that willingness to learn is something that definitely leads to success. She is very grateful to the fact that her first job was telemarketing because it taught her assertiveness.

“No matter what happens in your life it will turn for the better and turn as a learning advantage. I do not see everything as totally negative. I have remained optimistic and positive all the time. One thing I have learned about immigration is that no matter where you go you are the same person. If you have succeeded in one place you may succeed again. The same thing speaks for my personal life goals.”

Elga is successful in her business as a Planning and Evaluation Consultant with “Helping Organizations Break New Ground”.

Empowerment Through Experience

In an attempt to shed light on what are some indicators of empowerment for immigrant women the following were identified:

- The interviewees were mainly independent women, who did not give up easily, saw everything in life as a challenge, and had enough self-confidence.
- They perceived the empowerment process as taking their own skills, resources and goals and putting them in practice in different areas of life.
- They believed in their social skills and were able to make informed choices about their careers and employment opportunities.
- They are brave and future-orientated.

These women understand that a typical immigrant is not just an average person since they have the courage to immigrate. According to them, women who immigrate have certain traits that make them successful.

Elga Nicolova thinks that *“many immigrant women are empowered though the experience of immigration. Immigration process has reinforced and taught me that confidence in my skills and abilities have empowered me.”*

In the process of empowerment a very important concept for these women was participation, working with others and learning from their experience. Participation was identified as both a tool and part of the learning/growing process.

The courage and willingness to embrace the strength, integrity, and wisdom of others empowered **Anastasia (Sue) Zindros**, the owner of one of the Danforth’s most celebrated and successful restaurants, “Mezes”, to give back to her community through volunteerism.. She believes that *“we are the sum of all our parts and together we form a whole — if all the pieces are healthy, growing and flourishing, then we all benefit.”* She practices this ideal as a mother, a businesswoman and as a volunteer. *“Greek Town is a piece of the multicultural mosaic that makes Toronto a great city. When pieced together as a whole, these parts are what truly make Canada a great country.”*

Born on the island of Rhodes in Greece, Anastasia moved with her family to Toronto at the age of 6 and began attending local schools. She later enrolled at the University of Toronto, majoring in Psychology with a minor in Classical Studies. Due to a family tragedy, she was unable to pursue her career goal to work in a related area to her studies. Instead, she became the owner and manager of the restaurant.

Her tireless dedication to improving her neighbourhood led her to volunteer with the GreekTown on the Danforth Business Improvement Association for ten years. She was one of the founding members of the Taste of the Danforth Festival, an event that has raised \$700,000 for Toronto East General Hospital's Maternal, Newborn and Child Health Centre. In 2002 Ms. Zindros was honoured with the Queen's Golden Jubilee Medal for her tireless volunteerism in the community. A supporter of many local charities and community groups, Ms. Zindros and "Mezes" annually make substantial donations to numerous causes.

Different indicators showed that empowerment happened in the lives of each woman while they moved through the integration process. One such indicator was their willingness to speak out for other women, and their determination to keep women's issues at the forefront of discussions with friends, family and professionals.

Kay Blair deeply believes that *"people are genuinely good, and, if they are given the opportunity, they will achieve their full potential. I am committed to facilitating opportunities that help to raise people up, from wherever they are to wherever they might be."*

Throughout her career Kay has been proactive on women's issues. She has challenged systems of oppression that impact immigrant and racial minority women's economic participation, social development, and their general well being. Many of her volunteer activities led to the establishment of the first shelter in Canada for immigrant women who were victims of abuse.

Mentoring

Another success indicator was the participants determination to support other women through mentorship, coaching, and role modeling. The literature identifies many general advantages for women who have been mentored compared to those who haven't. These advantages range from higher-level first jobs, greater perceived career experiences and better preparation for work.

Experience has shown **Maria Palchta** that mentoring leads to faster attainment of relevant licensure and credentialing, and then to greater access to labour market opportunities. She would not have become a teacher in Canada if she had not listened to people who encouraged her, believed in her and helped her. When she was approached to become a mentor for Skills for Change, she immediately agreed. Although diagnosed with cancer, she has been actively working to integrate other immigrant women into the Ontario education system. *"I want to give back what I have received,"* explains Maria.

She has been a mentor to one woman for almost 10 years and thanks to her advice this woman was able to get into the education system. *"Helping someone I do not consider a sacrifice. If you want to help someone it does not matter how much it would cost you. I would not call it personal sacrifice but rather something as time dedication,"* says Maria.

Conclusion

What are the keys to success for these women? Were these women “entrepreneurs” in the real sense? The literature indicates that entrepreneurs are doers not thinkers, are born not made, are inventors not managers, and are risk takers not calculators. The experiences of these women demonstrate that. For the most part, these women are dedicated, competent and hardworking. This research will conclude with some insight into the combination of skills and traits that made these women successful.

A: ABLE TO MAKE STRATEGIC CHOICES

Immigrant women often act decisively. They think, plan, and then move like most successful entrepreneurs do. Their success rests on their ability to adapt to a situation and acquire new skills.

B: CONFIDENT, DEDICATED AND CHALLENGING

Almost without exception, each woman had a daring spirit. They were willing to take risk and were confident in their own abilities. Their success is often thought to be merely the product of daring endeavors. They had a vision, the vision informed their actions and decisions, and they were dedicated to achieving their vision. This dedication helped them endure the inevitable highs and lows of their passage.

All these successful women — whatever their unique personality characteristics — simply did not give up. They were undaunted by challenges and perceived failures and defeats as important learning experiences. They understood the importance of persevering. Kay Blair remarked, *“As women we believe that there is no such thing as failure. Everything that happens is an opportunity for learning and improving ourselves and those around us.”* And Ira Metani agreed, *“There is no failure for one who knows that the so-called failures give us a chance to start again. Think about how many times a baby falls as it is learning how to walk — many, many times they fall, but they get up right back.”*

C: PERSISTENT, CREATIVE

The traits that lead to success include initiative, persistence and creativity. All of the women interviewed had initiative. They started business, understood how to transfer their skills to careers and jobs they had not anticipated, and were able to find creative ways to apply their skills and experience. They are successful on their own terms.

D: ABLE TO LEARN/FLEXIBLE

Usually these women had a vision and knew where they wanted to go, how to get there and what to learn, sometimes by trial and error. In order to achieve their goals they did not rely solely on themselves. Rather, they listened to those who could provide advice or mentor them.

E: LOGICAL

These women were able to quickly recognize and act on opportunities when opportunity was apparent. They have the ability to analyze a situation, quickly determine how to proceed and move forward in a rational way. They are able to build on small successes and achieve larger goals.

The findings from the study highlight the similarity of the essential qualities and skills of immigrant women in their passage to successful. Each of the nine women are entrepreneurial, able to capitalize on opportunity, set and meet goals. Although they work in different spheres and sectors, they are all contributing to the Toronto economy.

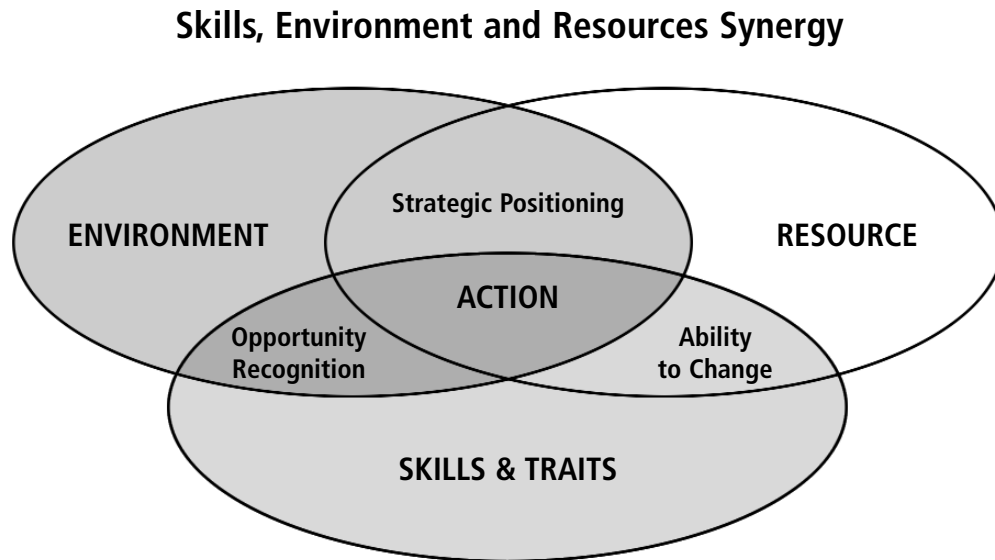
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Appendix 1

Graphic Summary of Entrepreneurial Skills and Traits of Immigrant Women

Figure 1



Appendix 2

List of Interviewees

Community

Kay Blair – Executive Director, MicroSkills

Zahra Parvinian – Good Food Box Team Manager, Food Share

Labour

Faduma Mohamed – Executive Director, Labour Community Services of Toronto and York Region Labour Council

Business

Anastasia (Sue) Zindros – Owner, Mezes Restaurant

Elga Nicolova – Planning and Evaluation Consultant, “Helping Organizations Break New Ground”

Christina Zachemski – Owner, “Ideal Mattress”

Education

Sheryl Nestel – Ph.D. Department of Sociology and Equity Studies, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto (OISE/UT)

Ira Metani – Teacher, Albion Heights Junior Middle School, Toronto

Maria Plachta – Computer Science Teacher/ Advisor of the Programming Enrichment Group (PEG) Woburn CI, Scarborough

Endnotes

- 1 Rosemary Brown. "Tasting diversity: A celebration of Immigrant Women and Their Cooking". 2002. Pg. 11. Working Women Community Centre.
- 2 Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, "Research Perspectives on Migration: Immigrant Entrepreneurs" Vol. 1/Number 2, January/February 1997
- 3 Ibid
- 4 Faduma Mohamed – Executive Director of the Labour Community Services of Toronto and York Region Labour Council, "Making the Passage — Reframing Success" Forum at Ryerson University, Feb.2, 2005. (Check against delivery)
- 5 Kay Blair: Executive Director, Microskills. Making the Passage: Reframing Success", Forum at Ryerson University, Feb.2, 2005. (Check against delivery)
- 6 Daniel Schugurensky, Bonnie Slade and Yang Luo. "Can volunteer work help me get a job in my field? On learning, immigration and labour markets" Ontario Institute for Studies in Education / University of Toronto. www.wallnetwork.ca/inequity/LL&W2005/SchugurenskyPaper.pdf
- 7 Anastasia (Sue) Zindros - Owner, Mezes Restaurant, "Making the Passage: Reframing Success", Forum at Ryerson University, Feb.2, 2005. (Check against delivery)