

## **LEARNING, SHARING, AND GROWING TOGETHER**

### **Leadership Development Training at KW Counselling Services**

Have you heard of the Community Leadership Training group offered by KW Counselling Services? I recently participated in this group and found out what a fun and great group it is. I would like to share the story with you.

The group is composed of 22 people who come from 15 different nationalities and stretch across the age spectrum. The oldest one in the group is Russian Speaking — she is in her 80s. The training sessions are on Wednesday nights. When you walk into room 217 at KW Counselling Services around 6:00, you are instantly embraced by a very welcoming aroma: food! It is ready on a side table and each time the food is different. Trying different cuisines has certainly broadened my appetite for foods that I'm not familiar with. Today it's Indian food, last time it was Portuguese food. Sharing food is only the beginning. We also tell our stories and talk about our various cultures. Sharing our experiences of leadership and then learning more about leadership are central goals of this training group.

People arrive and the meeting starts already while we were eating. Facilitators speak to us about leadership. Each time it is a new topic, followed by exchanging our thoughts, experiences, and feelings. It is stimulating to see the eagerness of each participant and to hear their views and personal stories. Let me just talk about some of the heated topics on the second day of training. The topic was about acculturation. As immigrant we have all experience it as we came to Canada, it is a process that we try to adjust ourselves to live in here.

#### **SOCIAL ASSISTANCE, COMMONLY CALLED "WELFARE"**

M: "I have worked so hard since I immigrated here. I never took one penny from welfare. I think the system is not fair for a person who has worked so hard! Some people are lazy; they do not take the work because it is not well paid. It is not fair."

H: "Let me share with you my stories. My husband had exactly the same thought as you did before he lost his job. He always worked so hard, and does not want to rely upon government support. But one day he lost his job, and without the system's help we wouldn't have been able to overcome that hard time."

A: "I agree with M, I think the welfare system creates laziness."

B: "It is a system to help people who have lost their job and are not able to support themselves. We should not judge other people's situations. And we should have sympathy for those who still rely upon welfare, because they don't know what it looks like to have a respectable job and a decent life."

I have acknowledged that this is an emotionally safe environment, participant not only able to express their opinions, thoughts, feelings without fear of being judged, but also learn how to patiently and respectfully listen to each others' stories. It is a place that we are accountable to each other.

## **BOYFRIENDS AND GIRLFRIENDS**

F: "I won't let my daughter to have a boyfriend. In my home country we do not have boyfriend or girlfriend relationships. I will tell her who she should marry."

P: "How old are your children? Wait until they become teenagers; you know you cannot control them. It is their right to make decision; you can only give your advice."

F: "Anyway, I do not like boyfriend or girlfriend, this kind of relationship; I won't allow my children to do the same things as Canadian does."

We all laugh.

As always more topics are stirred up and became heated debate: about wearing traditional clothing such as the Hijab; about how to solve family conflict and about how things are done differently here and back home; about the concept of "independence"; about not relying upon others . . . .

You can imagine our candor and openness on all topics. The facilitators make sure everyone has a voice. "Equity" compared with "equality": everyone not only has the right to speak (equality), but everyone in fact gets a chance to speak (equity). Probably you want to know what can one learn or gain from these 12 weeks of training for leadership. Put another way, what are the goals of community leadership training?

## **GOALS OF COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP TRAINING**

First, learning rules and concepts about being involved as a community leader; becoming acquainted with the concepts of community, leadership, acculturation, equality and equity; learning the process of starting a group, solving group conflict, learning how to advocate on behalf of a group, how to apply for funding, and much more.

Second, sharing stories from participants who are community leaders or who will be community leaders in the various minority groups present in KW communities. It is through hearing others' opinions and voicing one's own that this training group becomes a community itself: a community representing 15 nationalities but with a common concern to bring better and fuller life to each person's community.

Third, learning from each other's experiences, tips, failures, successes, and becoming aware that each community has its own challenges but also has its own strengths to face and overcome those challenges.

Fourth, upon completion of the training, a participant can apply for a Newcomer Partnership Grant with their community group. The grants are funded by United Way KW and Kitchener and Waterloo

Community Foundation. The leadership training group is supported by the funding from United Way K –W and Kitchener Waterloo Community Foundation, and New Horizons for seniors.

The meeting time flies by. The two and half hours allotted for the meeting are soon finished and we are looking forward to the next. The things that I have set down here are the tip of the iceberg. You have to experience the meetings yourself in order to get a sense of what it feels like to be a member of a community—if only for two and a half hours—composed of people from 15 different nationalities and to hear the amazing stories each of them has to tell.

K-W Counselling Services and K-W Multicultural centre have collaborated at designing this training and it will be offered again in January at K-W Counselling services.

If you want to find out more or interested in taking the training, please contact the facilitator Georgina de Barros at KW Counselling Services: 519-884-0000, ext. 212.

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