



Focus For Ethnic Women: Providing Training in Leadership

By Consuelo Solar

Dana Hociung arrived in Kitchener in 2003 from Romania, and started searching for work in the communications sector, with plenty of good expectations. She looked for an employment agency just to get some job-hunting tips, and what she found instead was a support system called Focus for Ethnic Women (FEW). "I went through their Skills Unlimited program, and got a lot of information regarding job search, how to prepare for interviews, how to present myself, what the market can offer, and so on. I was coming from a society where you have to put your picture on the resume, so I had a lot to learn," she remembers.

After nine weeks, Hociung was placed in a retail position at Staples, and stayed with that company for two years, while completing a Communication Studies degree at Wilfrid Laurier University. "One of my greatest accomplishments after finishing the Skills Unlimited program was that I realized that I needed to continue my education; I had a degree from back home but it wasn't recognized in Canada. Focus helped me understand that I needed to get new credentials. If I had not gone to Focus, I would've missed this opportunity, because they gave me enough information to make that decision at the right time," she admits.

Skills Unlimited was FEW's first program, when the organization began in 1988 to support immigrant and visible minority women in the Kitchener Waterloo area. Over the

years, the agency has implemented additional services, and today, with an all women board and staff – most of whom are first or second generation immigrants from various backgrounds – they offer skills development, computer training, job readiness skills, healthy lifestyle community groups, leadership training, and industrial sewing training through three main programs: Skills Unlimited, Investing in Women's Futures, and Healthy Lifestyles.

Janina Robinson, Project Coordinator for Immigrant Women and Voice, their newest pilot leadership program funded by Status of Women Canada, believes that women must come together to support one another in order to improve their participation in Canadian society. "Women feel more comfortable in an environment where they can share their life experiences with other women. They are the core strength of their families, and by providing them support, leadership training, and assistance, we assist their families as well," she says.

For this reason they aspire to promote economic self-sufficiency, through Immigrant Women and Voice. The program will encourage women and teenage girls to see themselves in leadership roles, give them the chance to improve their soft skills, and serve as a volunteer opportunity to become involved in the community. "Women need to be involved in their own lives. They need to be able to stand on their own and be a part of Canadian society, where they are valued and appreciated for their individuality," she observes.

At the core of FEW's mission is a holistic approach to the settlement process, considering aspects like physical, emotional, and mental stability to enhance self-esteem and promote personal empowerment. By looking at the "whole" woman, they ensure that they can comprehend their needs and find better ways to support them.

"We need to understand that settlement is not simply finding a job and a home. A woman also needs to find a community that is supportive of all aspects of her life. Feeling at home in Canada needs to include feeling safe, happy, and valued. At Focus we are ready to give a listening ear to women who have been through hardships to get where they are. We draw upon those experiences to help move women to the next stage of growth in their lives," Robinson explains.

According to Janice Lee, Youth Facilitator for Immigrant Women and Voice, all their services respond to barriers that some minority and immigrant women face, which might be different from those faced by men. "As the primary care-givers in the family, many women tend to look at themselves last in all situations. A woman will support her husband to find meaningful employment, care for the children, and maintain the household which is a full-time job within itself, but it is often difficult for her to find the time and energy to job-search for herself with these additional responsibilities on her shoulders," she says.

To help their clients overcome some of these obstacles, FEW makes a constant effort to address concerns such as cultural shock, limited financial resources, lack of networking opportunities, and language problems. "We provide childcare solutions, when funding is available; refer them to our close-community partners who offer ESL classes; provide information and support to improve their quality of life; encourage understanding of Canadian Culture; and we empower women to realize their self-sufficiency through gaining knowledge and training," observes Lee.

Elpida Pashartis, Program Manager at FEW, explains that their programs result from the necessities they identify in the community. "We continuously initiate new projects to meet the needs of our participants and our organization's mission. Each program serves a different purpose and a different profile of immigrant woman; they all are multi-year funded and we have a long term commitment from our funders. At the end of each program we have evaluation surveys completed by our participants, and we also track the outcomes. We consider all of them successful," she comments.

FEW also has a large pool of employers who collaborate with their programs, providing opportunities like the one Hociung got at Staples. "Recruiting new employers is an on-going requirement for our programs. We generally contact them through cold calls and letters initially, and then visits and meetings, before contracting them to be a host for placements," says Pashartis. "We started hosting informal employer networking days to encourage our participants in communicating and gaining confidence to speak with employers. We also invite employers to be guest speakers in our programs, engage them in conducting mock interviews with participants, and take part in other events throughout the year."

Hociung completed her degree from Laurier in June

2006, got her first postgraduate job in July, and since then she has been working in various positions for different companies, all of them in her field of choice. She still uses the information she obtained at FEW to look for work opportunities. "They were very important in my life, so I still go to them, and I feel at home. I know the place, I know the people; I like to interact with their clients, so I've been volunteering. I always help them with anything I can, whatever they need. I'll always be thankful," she states.

To obtain more information about Focus For Ethnic Women and their new leadership training program, Immigrant Women and Voice, visit their website at <http://few.on.ca> or call 519-746-3411.

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Consuelo is a journalist, screenwriter and story editor. She has worked as field producer for *CNN*, and reporter for *The Miami Herald* and other international media outlets. She currently works as a correspondent for Terra Networks and is involved in independent film projects.

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