

Immigrants can lend a helping hand

Life as an immigrant has its share of challenges and obstacles. In addition to adapting to a new culture, learning a new language and struggling to make ends meet, many immigrants in Edmonton are volunteering to help build stronger, better communities.

In this series, Volunteer Edmonton will be highlighting immigrant volunteerism in Edmonton – the remarkable ways in which immigrant volunteers are giving back and making lasting contributions that bridge cultural communities.

TIME AND EFFORTS

From women's groups and parenting programs to sponsoring refugees around the world and peer support for youth, these programs and services are just a few examples of the many initiatives developed by immigrant volunteers who have donated their time and efforts, and sometimes even their own homes, to help make life better for those in need.

While immigrants are slightly less likely than native-born Canadians to volunteer at 40 per cent versus 49 per cent respectively, those immigrants who did volunteer contributed more hours at 171 hours

versus 163 hours.

It's important to understand the context of charitable giving as the volunteering behaviours of immigrants are likely to be related to their immigrant status. Spending time volunteering can be a difficult endeavor when you consider most immigrants and refugees are struggling to find employment and meet basic needs within the first few years of arrival.

"When we talk about immigrant volunteering, it's a completely different level of engagement," says Janina Strudwick, co-ordinator of the Multicultural Coalition.

She explains that immigrants volunteer, especially in their own communities, because it's often a matter of crisis.

"It's imperative for them to volunteer because they realize that if they don't, there might not be anyone to do it."

Strudwick has seen how immigrant volunteers work tirelessly to reach out and



PART ONE OF SIX

unite different communities.

"We can say broadly that many communities face divisions – clan and tribal – that are thousands of years old. When they come to Canada, they don't suddenly forget about it. This is something that is deeply ingrained and can still divide people after they've arrived in Canada," she says. "So when we see programs that unite people, they are highly successful and not easy to pull off."

For Amandla Ngwenya and Dallas Gumbo, two members from the Zimbabwe community, the Bossolona Football Club does exactly that.

"It's more than just soccer," says Ngwenya, team manager for the club. He explains how the soccer club is about people coming together and getting to know one another.

"This is for anyone who likes soccer," Ngwenya emphasizes.

Soccer also provides an opportunity for

community members to address concerns or needs in the community that would otherwise remain hidden.

"Through the soccer club, we learn about how we can help people," Gumbo explains.

'OPENS THE DOOR'

"The point is that it's about soccer and it manages to bring people together. People like Amandla realize this and that opens the door to start talking about other issues in the community. It sounds very simple, but it's one of the most difficult things to do," Strudwick remarks.

Over the next five weeks, Volunteer Edmonton will be examining how immigrants in Edmonton are making a huge impact on our communities.

To learn more how you can help the Bossolona Football Club or how to become a team player, contact Amandla at mzila2001@yahoo.com.

For more information or suggestions for story ideas, please contact Evelyn Pham at epham@volunteeredmonton.com, call (780) 732-6655 or check out our website at www.volunteeredmonton.com.

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