

From isolation to independence

Program bridges the cultural divide that immigrant women feel

JENNIFER BROWN
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

Ma Rong knows what it's like to arrive in a strange new country with a small child and no understanding of the language or culture.

Two years ago, Ma came to Toronto from China with her husband, Hanming Wang, and one-year-old son, William, in the middle of a January cold snap.

"It was so cold. I remember the first couple of days, I stayed in the apartment building because it just kept snowing. I also remember feeling some depression," she says.

For three days, Ma did not leave that apartment in the Sherbourne and Dundas Sts. area.

"I was afraid to talk to anyone," she recalls. "That was the only place we could find that was in walking distance to my husband's job. One of my friends told me there were a lot of Chinese people living in that area so we took it. My English wasn't good yet and I was afraid to talk with a native person."

Eventually, Ma left the apartment and sought out her local community centre.

"I thought it would be better to get out and speak with a person who speaks the same language as me. I just needed someone to talk to and, especially for a young mom, I was looking for something to do with my son and to meet other newcomers like me."

She and her son attended classes at an Ontario Early Years Centre.

"I think it was then I realized there were a lot of resources for a newcomer," she says.

Soon after that, she heard about the Immigrant Women Integration Program (IWIP), founded in 2002 through the Centre for Community Learning and Development and funded by the United Way.

"We were trying to figure out how to use our training skills to broaden the impact of our work within the community of Cabbagetown and St. James Town, Regent Park and so forth," explains Alfred Jean-Baptiste, executive director of the



RICK MADONIK/TORONTO STAR

After emigrating from China two years ago, Rong Ma felt isolated at home with son, William, when husband Hanming Wang went to work. But she soon learned there were a 'lot of resources for a newcomer.' She got involved with the Immigrant Women Integration Program and it made a big difference.

learning centre at Gerrard and Parliament Sts.

"We realized, with the changing demographics, there was a higher proportion of newcomer women who were isolated. Many were having challenges finding employment opportunities and accessing services within the community."

IWIP participants receive intensive training — 15 hours a week for 12 months — to become community development workers. The idea is that women from the program will deliver programs and work with social service agencies in their own communities.

IWIP graduates are required to organize three to five workshops and information sessions to address challenges specific to certain communities.

The women also take part in a three-month work placement with local service agencies.

About 90 to 95 per cent of program participants find jobs in the social

service sector, Jean-Baptiste says.

"Since we started, about 25 women have been through the program, but the real impact is felt through the workshops and information sessions, where they reach another

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CHINESE IMMIGRANT

350 to 400 women, and that has been the norm every year since the program started," he says. "It speaks to the fact there was a real need."

Past program participants have included lawyers, a schoolteacher and a university professor. One woman from Nepal held a master's degree in social work.

"Our goal is to create a cultural bridge between the service providers and all of the potential service users who can't access programs because they can't speak the language, and a lot of our trainees have been able to bridge that gap," says Jean-Baptiste.

The program certainly created a bridge for Ma.

"I didn't understand what a community development person would do, but thought I could start to develop my career here from that starting point," she says.

In China, Ma worked as a human resources manager for a transportation company. When she first saw the flyer for IWIP, the literature indicated its goal was to "reduce newcomer women's isolation."

"I thought, 'That's not for me ... until I realized it was true. I didn't know my neighbour or where the grocery store was,'" says Ma.

"I didn't know how other people on the street treated each other or

cultural things. I was scared. But I think that's just human nature.

"I told myself 100 times a day I needed to get out of that cycle and get out of my comfort zone and just break it."

Ma is giving back to the community where she first lived in Toronto.

"I'm so proud of myself. My parents taught me that silence is golden and actions speak louder than words. I now stand before the person I used to be: the newcomer. They want to get a better life and be the leader of their family and to control their own life."

Her favourite part of IWIP is the focus on self-management.

"I needed to find my position in a new country, I had culture shock. Knowledge is easy to learn; a skill is easy to learn. The only thing you have to take time to do is change yourself a little — change your attitude and you can see the big picture, which is very important and that is to feel you are part of this community."