

# Toronto Centre For Community Learning & Development: Moving forward with IWIP

BY Brian J. D'Souza



Chinese-born Grace, an IWIP alumni from Regent Park.

**O**n July 19, the organization known since 1978 as East End Literacy was renamed The Toronto Centre for Community Learning & Development (CCL&D). The name change reflects a renewed commitment to other programs such as the Immigrant Women Integration Program (IWIP).

IWIP was formed in 2002 to address the issues of language barriers and immigrant isolation, as well as the lack of services sensitive to varied cultures. Initially funded with a grant from the Trillium foundation, and currently supported by the United Way, the program is designed

to give immigrants agency both on a personal and community level.

Providing an intensive 12-month curriculum for 10 women, the program allows them to sharpen their leadership skills and to develop in other areas. Specific training modules can be broken down into the following groups: information and referral; board governance; executive coaching; access and equity; and theory of change.

Shova, a participant who emigrated from Nepal in 2004 with her husband and children explains, "The course strengthened my foundation on Community Development and has

helped me further develop my credentials. This program provided me the roadmap to continue my vocation on community work."

Initially, her experiences in Canada were a mixed bag of blessings and curses. The cold weather, different types of food and diverse city were all new and welcome experiences for her; on the down side, finding employment became a real challenge. Given conflicting advice about how to best find a job, Shova was confused and unsure of her direction. Luckily through volunteering for a non-profit organization, she met a contact who was a former student of CCL&D who steered her towards IWIP.

Another successful graduate of the program is Grace, who immigrated to Canada from China with her husband and son in 2002. Like many others, Grace had a solid career in her former country where she had worked as an immigration consultant. Attending George Brown College to supplement her credentials became a problem due to transportation issues, so Grace moved to Regent Park.

The Regent Park community requires investment and development to improve conditions. While her friends tried to discourage her from laying down roots, Grace used her skills from the program combined with her desire to work for change and to make a positive impact. She noted the proximity of her new location to facilities vital in providing services and information for new immigrants.

Eventually, Grace found out about the IWIP program through links within her neighbourhood. She explains that "The program has provided me the opportunity to bridge the gap in understanding the Canadian culture... it allowed me to immerse into observing and seeing how people think and work." Her vision for the future of Regent Park addresses current problems while maintaining an optimistic outlook. "One day, people will choose to live and not be forced to live here."

One longtime observer of the program remarked, "The women who studied together all stick up for each other and support their peers." Working together has created a bond among the members of IWIP that seems to transcend the classroom.

