

The Changing Face of Prince Edward Island

By Stephanie Douglas

The existence of a mosaic of rich cultural and ethnic diversity may not be obvious on Prince Edward Island, but it does exist, and continues to grow each year.

Kevin Arsenault, Executive Director of the Newcomers to Canada Association, said PEI annually opens its arms to 135-155 new immigrants. These numbers, said Arsenault, have remained consistent over the past decade. The only significant change said Arsenault, is that increasingly, PEI's new immigrants are more visible since the door has been opened wider in allowing people from distressed African countries to immigrate to Canada.

This increase in visible diversity is evident in a number of newcomers who have arrived in the province over the past year, and have come from such diverse places as Sierra Leone, The Dominican Republic, Ethiopia, and Nigeria.

As well, PEI's Latin American community came in to being, and grew considerably, during the late eighties and early nineties when El Salvador was at the height of its political unrest. Over the years, there have been additions to the Latin American community, with a number of people who have come to PEI from Cuba and Nicaragua entering the country either as immigrants or as refugees.

It is not that PEI was not already a multicultural society, said Arsenault, but rather people tend to forget that this province was built upon the labour of immigrants, whether they were Scottish, Lebanese, French, English, Irish or Dutch. The diversity is built into the very fabric of our society. What tends to happen is that over a peri-

od of time, people seem to forget that in essence, we all share the commonality of at one point, having come from somewhere else. Arsenault cautions that it can be easy to lose an element of sensitivity to other people from diverse cultures and to recognize that sometimes we build in, without knowing, barriers to their full participation within the community.

"It is important to note that there are various expressions of racism. One such expression is that there may be systems set up such as in instances of institutional racism in which people are not aware of the racist implications of their actions. Another expression is in the exclusion of people because they are visibly different and have different accents. Again, these exclusions are not always intentional, but the effect is the same," Arsenault said.

Patricia Butler, Education Officer with the PEI Human Rights Commission, said the provincial government is becoming more aware in recognising some of the issues embodied in understanding racism and in working against it. To address some of these issues, the provincial government recently hired Thilak Tennekone as Project Manager to complete a report entitled, "Bringing Down the Barriers." Together with Janet Doiron from the Public Service Commission, they will be drafting an employment equity policy for consideration by the province.

"We are the only province in Canada not to have an employment equity policy in place. The past three annual reports published by the Human Rights Commission have stressed the need for an employment equity policy within the public sector," Butler said.



Butler is passionate about the work she does in her role as Education Officer with the Human Rights Commission. She has an inherent belief in the importance and value of what she does. She quotes Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. as having once said, "Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about the things that matter," and that, said Butler, "is how I perceive myself as Education Officer. I want to keep going like an Ever-Ready bunny until somewhere down the road someone will say, 'tell us how it used to be,'" said Butler.

In working toward educating and bringing greater awareness to the community, Butler aims at trying to help people visualise and understand what it might be like for a person who comes to the Island and is visibly different.

"From the time a visible minority steps foot out of their bed, they know they are a minority, they know they have different coloured skin, they know they speak a different language and the majority of us don't even give these things a second thought." Some of the things that the average person, who is not from a visible minority, take for granted are simple.

Such things as the ability to

buy the right coloured makeup for their skin colour, the colour of a Band-Aid, or of stockings. In the end, Butler said it is about going beyond the visual differences and coming to the essence of what all human beings want. "A human being only wants to be treated with respect and dignity and allowed without ridicule to participate fully and equally without fear of being discriminated against", she said.

For a visually expressive introduction to the cultural variety of new Islanders who are a part of our community, Arsenault would like to encourage people to come and see the weekly presentations that are taking place on Tuesday nights at the Basilica Recreation Centre entitled "The World Among Us."

Each presentation is a cultural and geographic snapshot of a newcomer's country of origin. All the presentations start at 7 pm and they are free and include refreshments.

For the rest of March and the beginning of April there will be the following presentations: March 20th, The Dominican Republic; March 27th, the South Pacific Island of Mauritius; April 3rd, Iran and April 10th, Liberia.