

Immigrant journeys

Paul Liu's journey from China is chronicled, along with other Canadian newcomers, in a powerful collection of pictures and stories

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Last Updated: 16th February 2009, 2:56am

Paul Liu credits an immigrant training program for taking him from a fast-food restaurant to a dream job almost five years after arriving here from China.

Liu, 37, a married father of one, obtained a government Career Bridge internship that helped land him a job as an IT buyer for the City of Mississauga.

"The program helped me make contacts with people in the business," Liu said yesterday. "It was good for helping me improve my English and dealing with people."

He now purchases software, hardware and maintenance support for the city.

"This is a good program for immigrants," Liu said. "I couldn't get an internship without the program."

Liu is among a score of successful immigrants featured Feb. 17 to 23 in a travelling photo exhibit called 20 Journeys: A visual essay of the immigrant experience being staged at Mississauga City Hall.

NEWCOMERS' TALENTS

Elizabeth McIsaac, of Toronto Region Immigrant Employment Council, said the exhibit showcases the talents that newcomers bring to employers in the GTA.

"Immigrants have a hard time finding employment in the labour market," McIsaac said yesterday. "We are putting a face and story behind the numbers."

She said newcomers can face problems getting started in the workforce due to language or cultural differences.

"We are helping them make the connection with employers," McIsaac said. "They bring experience and skills that are required by employers in the region."

City of Mississauga spokesman Martin Powell said the exhibit and programs like TRIEC help integrate immigrants into the community.

"A lot of immigrants have skills but may not understand how things work," Powell said. "Immigrants make good employees and it is a win-win situation."

He said the city hired a number of immigrants, like Liu, who've graduated from job-training programs.

City officials said half of Mississauga's 700,000 residents were born outside Canada.

Sheldon Leiba, of Mississauga Board of Trade, said there's a large pool of talented immigrants for employers to choose from.

POWERFUL

"There was a large shortage of skilled workers until the recent economic downturn," Leiba said. "We are fortunate the community has attracted a large pool of skilled immigrants -- some with academic backgrounds."

The powerful exhibit features stories of immigrants who've gotten jobs here after arriving from China, India, the Philippines, Ghana, Nigeria, Dominica, Lebanon and six other countries.

- Philippines-born Aileen Raquel was living below the poverty line during her first three years in Canada. She took a bridging program at Ryerson University that prepared her for a job at the Catholic Children's Aid Society of Toronto, where she's worked for a year.

- Math teacher Babatunde Adebajo toiled as a dishwasher after arriving here from Nigeria in 2006. After pleading with a doughnut shop for work, he found out about a teacher training program at George Brown College, that led to him landing a teaching job.

- Hadi El Rayess was an electronics engineer in Lebanon but wanted to live in a stable country. On arrival, he joined the Canadian Professional Sales Association and is now a director of international sales for i3DVR, a digital video technology company.

- Jean Kin was referred to the Toronto Region Immigrant Employment Council's (TRIEC) mentoring program after arriving here from Singapore. A TD bank mentor became her guide as she applied for jobs. After a rejection, Kin was able to land a job at TD.

- Moving to Canada from China opened Yijun Wang's eyes to the world. His priorities were to improve his English and find an ideal job. An internship at Procter & Gamble with Career Bridge led him to Mars Canada, where he works as a pet product scientist.

- Javier Santos left his native Mexico to escape pollution and crime. With a university degree under his belt, Santos saw a posting for an LCBO job that led to him climbing to the director of the wine business unit. Sadly, he was laid off last November.

- Jyoti Shukla has helped more than 900 immigrants become more employable since arriving here from India. A TRIEC mentoring program led to her volunteering at Dixie Bloor Neighbourhood Centre, where she was hired as an employment counsellor.

- York University graduate Caryl Registe came here from Dominica to better herself. After searching for months and not finding a job, she checked out TRIEC's mentoring partnership program that got her an interview and job with Legal Aid Ontario.
- Haya Zilberboim and her family left Israel four years ago for Canada's stable political climate. She returned to school to upgrade her English and certify as a chartered accountant. She's now the CEO at Fishman Holdings North America Inc.
- IT specialist Kevin Chen posted his resume on the Web and found a job three weeks after arriving here from China in 2005. He started at BAU Solutions Canada and when they were acquired by Deloitte, Chen stayed on as a senior specialist.
- Kamal Joshi joined an Ontario human resources group long before he arrived here from India. While with a Career Bridge program he saw a posting for a large firm that snapped him up. He's now a compensation consultant at Rogers Communications.
- Jie Lu began her professional life in Canada working in a restaurant after moving from China. She took English classes and applied for a York University program that qualified her as a registered nurse. She's now a member of a family health team.
- Pilot Marcelo Sagel and his wife left Argentina for the U.S. and then Canada after an economic meltdown. He lived in California while flying an ambulance in Elliot Lake. Those days he commuted 14 hours each way to work. He now flies for Porter Airlines.
- Indian-born Renu Mehta had a lot of gigs before ending up as editor of the Indian Express and Divya Bhaskar, two weekly South Asian newspapers. She's volunteered at Rogers Cable, interned at CHUM, OMNI and even did Live Traffic for CP24.
- Sibaway Issah arrived here from Ghana via Denmark to obtain a second master's degree. Unable to find work, a job fair led him to Career Bridge and an internship at St. Michael's Hospital, where he was offered a position in the purchasing department.
- Richard Goyder hit Bay St. after his arrival from the U.K. He began networking before coming here and made relationships with headhunters, consultants and banking firms. It paid off. He's now vice-president for portfolio management for the Royal Bank.
- Micheline Jeanfrancois found Mexico City overcrowded and lacked the cultural diversity of Canada. At a bilingual job fair, she was hired by Procter & Gamble and has since been promoted three times. Her language skills are in demand for work in Brazil and Argentina.
- Maryna Bakuntseva moved here in 2003 for a healthy future for her daughter and to get away from the after-effects of Chernobyl. With a master's degree in electronics engineering and a PhD in physics, she obtained work as a researcher at Seneca College.
- Indian-born Vikram Ahluwalia snagged two job offers in two weeks after shaving his Sikh beard and removing his turban while job-hunting in Canada. A Career Bridge internship led to a senior position with GlaxoSmithKline Consumer Healthcare Canada.

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