

Anwer Omar

Ugandan Asian Oral History Project: Settling In

Shezan Muhammedi: "You first came into Montreal then ended up in Perth. What was sort of that initial settlement experience like? I guess like the winter and all that jazz?"

Anwer Omar: "That's a terrific question because when I arrived it was—in those days, it used to be very cold, I'm telling you. And, don't forget, we came with summer clothes. I had these leather-soled shoes and nice thin pants. The first day, I don't think I even had a pair of jeans. So I went to work, like I said ten days—I remember very clear, it was 10th of November and it started to snow that day, and I'm wearing this... and I had to walk because I had no transportation. It's not a long walk, I would say it was a fifteen, twenty-minute walk from where I was living. I started to slip and slide and so I talked to the Manpower guy, I said, "What do I do?" He says, "Don't worry, I have this friend of mine, he owns this store. I'll take you there in the evening." So we went. Nice people, I'll tell you. Went there, the guy said, "Whatever you need, don't worry about paying. Pay me when you can." I bought myself a pair of jeans, winter boots—jacket we had got in Montreal, that was one thing they did. When we were there, they took us to this little... they had all kinds of jackets so I was able to pick a winter jacket. But I didn't have gloves or anything like that so I bought it from this place and he wrote it down and said, "Just pay me whenever." In those days, I think my pay was sixty-five dollars a week and I had got very cheap accommodation so I was able to pay him on a weekly basis and that's how it happened.

The way I had approached this was, I wanted to make it so I didn't care. I said, "Whatever happens." Yes, it was depressing in the beginning but my attitude was to make it. And then I was lucky, like I said, I got into this organization, they were inviting me. The other guys fell behind in that, those three people. They were not the type to come out and, you know, mix with people as fast as I did. For me, it was no problem. I started to make friends. The guy from Manpower became my good friend. He would take me to hockey games, you know, go and watch hockey games, go to the movies. The movie theatre was like... how far was Smiths Falls from Perth?"

Anonymous: "Twenty some..."

Omar: "Twenty minutes maybe?"

Anonymous: "About twenty minutes yeah, to drive."

Omar: "Twenty minutes out. It's another town, Smiths Falls, about twelve thousand. Perth had six thousand and it still has six thousand but it's really developed now. It serves a large community because there's a hospital in Perth. It serves about twenty thousand people from all

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the other villages and everything else. Like I said, that one interview really helped me out because then I became very active in the community that helped me forget about everything else and I started to move up.

I started to sit on the Chambers as a board director and then I became president of this organization... have you heard of Jaycees at all? It used to be a very popular organization in the past. It used to be called Junior Chamber of Commerce. It catered to young business people between the ages of eighteen and thirty-nine, that's how it started, it started in the US. Basically, what it did for you was... the organization had tools where they would teach you leadership skills. While you're doing that you're also doing community service. But they changed the name to Jaycees and then they opened it up to anybody, not just business people, but it was only a male organization in those days. Now it would be against the law to do that, right? I joined that and that is one of the best things that happened because I met young Canadians who I associated with. When they saw my skillsets as well and I started to organize functions, they were floored that I could do such a good job in doing things. In 1973, I organized the Santa Claus Parade there, and I didn't even know anything about the Santa Claus Parade, and in 1974, I was organizing soapbox derbies and things like that. I was doing a lot of community fundraising type of stuff. In '76, I became president of that organization and so that sort of kept me going and I just didn't look back. The only thing that I missed in that first ten years was cricket because I didn't even know cricket existed and that was not even my focus because it was right out of my mind at that time until I went to Toronto.

I think my experiences were very, very pleasant, and I think people developed a lot of respect for me. At that time, we were the only coloured people in that town—it was a completely white town. So people ask me, "Was there racism?" I said, "Once they started to know you there was no problem," because they said, "This guy is as good as us or even better." Within a few months, I started to do peoples' income taxes. All those old timers... they were all going to these income tax people and I said, "Why are you doing that?" They said, "Oh, it's very hard," and all that. So I read, I said, "No, I can do this." I charged them five bucks or ten bucks in those days. I did all their income taxes so I developed that as a side business. And as we were going along, once I was in the Jaycees, we used to organize dances. DJ'ing was just getting into vogue at the time. Most of the dances would have live bands and all, but it was getting expensive so DJ'ing was just getting in. Now, for our dances, we had to bring in a guy from Ottawa. He would come with his records, you know. It wasn't as fancy as you see now. There was not as much mixing and your mixes were very simple. And I loved music, I had a tremendous knowledge of music even from back home, English music and so on. I said, "That could be a potential." On the side I started a DJ'ing business and I thrived and I flourished in that. I started with one system, I had two systems going then and I hired a guy. So I'd play at all these local dances. I would go into villages that if you blinked, you would miss them but when you go there—they would hire me—there's a little community hall and three hundred people would show up from all these little places. So that sort of, you know, added to my life a little bit. This was on the side, this was

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weekends—I would be playing generally Friday and Saturdays. So that went for a few years. I did well and then I had a little bit of my income tax thing going on the side while I was working here.

In that time I developed a lot more, I learned business basically, because I had zero knowledge. Though I had an opportunity, in hindsight, I should have done it, but I had finished my teaching degree and the guy—I had met this fellow, he was a visiting professor from Kingston, Queen's University. He left me his address and he said, "When you come there, get in touch with me and I'll help you." So I wrote to him when I was here—in the beginning, I didn't have means to travel, you know, you had to take buses and it was not that easy. I wrote to him and he says, "Yep, no problem, I can get you into the university but you'll have to do two years." So I should have done it but I said, "Two years..." I had done my three years and I was at the time thinking of getting my mom and I said, "I already have a job, do I do this?" In hindsight, I should have done it because it's something that I always enjoy and whatever I did in my teaching over the years has helped me because, you know, I run business courses, I run all kinds of functions and stuff like that, all this speaking and talking and expressing yourself, but it never happened. Anyways, life took me in a different direction.

Once I got into this bookkeeping thing I tried to learn and taught myself—I'm basically self-taught in business and became reasonably okay at it so that I could give advice to other companies and I've done that over the years. Even now, I get a lot of people calling me—people starting, people who know me—and I still help them out if I can and so on, and I do a lot of work in the cricket community here for their auditing and wherever I can help. I'm busy, I'm also on the condominium board here—we're a self-managed condo so we do a lot of work as well. So my experience... the only bad experience was when my wife went through the transplant part of it. But from the day I arrived, I was lucky—touch wood. We flourished very well and you will see, this is the experience with Ugandans, right? You'll come across very few who didn't succeed because I think we came with a mindset that we wanted to succeed."