

Hassan Hirji

Ugandan Asian Oral History Project: Settling In

Hassan Hirji: "The very next week [after arriving in Brockville], I was working. They gave me an aptitude test so I started working, and because of my very good chemistry knowledge, I was able to start working with a chemist in helping out with making different mixtures for antibiotics. He would give me all these different measurements and all that, but, mind you, you had to prepare it in large quantities because it goes through the machines and makes all sorts of different things and every few hours, they keep on changing. It was such a great experience to work in such an industry where I got so much knowledge, so much exposure to all these intellectual people.

I bought my first car within a month, two months, or something. There was a guy who was giving me a ride in the beginning, but within two or three months, I went for driving lessons and bought a car. My parents were becoming very lonely in that small town because we were living by ourselves and there was no community around, there was no jamatkhana and all that. My sister was living in Collingwood and we found out where all the different families were living, and finally we moved to Toronto.

What I used to do in Brockville was, I used to work at Parke-Davis but at the same time in the evening and on Saturdays too, I'd go to night schools and I did my accounting and economics diploma. When I came to Toronto, I landed a job in one of the accounting departments, so I was doing accounting. I was an accounting clerk doing payables and receivables kind of stuff. Then I visited Montreal again because my niece was settled in Montreal. She came from Zaire so she knew a lot of French, so she settled in Montreal. We went to visit, and this is where I met my wife, in Montreal. She was working for Bell Canada and then she transferred to Toronto Bell Canada and we got married here in Toronto. We've been married since then and are living in the same house.

Then what I did was, I went and upgraded myself once I got married and once we were a little more settled. I did some upgrading in computer skills and all that stuff. With the help of my computer skills and accounting skills, I was able to land a position where I manage a system. That's what I'm still doing—I've been working with the same company for the past thirty years and my wife worked for Bell Canada for thirty-three years. So *shukar* [thanks to God] that yes, we had challenges in the process of settlement, but we were one of the very fortunate families that with a little bit of education, came a long way."