

Terence Francis

Ugandan Asian Oral History Project: Arrival and Early Experiences

Terence Francis: “We landed in Montreal. Went to the immigration in Montreal. When I had done my interview in Uganda, the guy said to me, “Where do you want to go in Canada?” I’d been to the US but had never been to Canada. The only thing I remember seeing was a trailer or a video on TV about the Calgary Stampede, so I said, “Calgary.” I ended up in Montreal and he said, “You’re going to Calgary.” And Errol was already in Montreal. My mom wasn’t there yet, she was still in Uganda with Tom. We had a cousin in Montreal so I called him and he said, “Listen, you know, I’m happy for you guys to come out of there but you’re in the system, don’t get out of the system. While you’re in the system, they’re going to look after you until you get settled. When you come out of the system, you’re on your own.” And he says, “Not that I don’t want you at our house, but I don’t think it’s the right thing for you to do.” So I talked to this guy and I said, “Well I don’t really want to go to Calgary.” He said, “Well we’re not sending people to Toronto.” I had sent some resumes out before I left, and one of the airlines based out of Winnipeg had sent me a note saying, “We’ll be hiring in Toronto and we’d be interested in talking to you,” so I took that thing out and showed it to the immigration guy and he agreed to send us into Toronto.

That night, they took us into Toronto. It was night and the kids were restless. The Manpower person in Toronto met us, put us in a cab, and sent us to a hotel downtown. We got into this hotel and it was a fleabag, an old hotel. I think they closed it down a month after we stayed there. I think they rented rooms by the hour. It was terrible—bedbugs, the whole thing. The next morning, I walked into the Manpower office on Dundas, walked in there, and I said to the guy, “I know we are sort of refugees and I don’t expect much but I don’t think I can stay in that hotel. I have two young kids and this thing is dirty and filthy, and all these things happened. I just can’t stay there.” He said to me, “There’s a problem here. First of all, you don’t have any furniture so I can put you in a furnished apartment but most of them will not take you. Secondly, if I put you in an unfurnished, you’re not going to have any furniture.” So I go, “Well, what other alternatives?” He said, “There’s a church, a Baptist church, in Willowdale, Ontario that has agreed to take on a hundred Uganda families.” And he says, “I see you’re Catholic, does that offend you?” I said “No.” He says, “Well, can I send you to the church?” “Fine.” So he put us in a cab and we headed off to this church in Willowdale. We were met by the pastor. He came out, talked to us and said, “Welcome, we hope we can make life easier for you. You have been assigned to stay with a Dr. Harrison and his family who live up in Thornhill. He will come to pick you up in an hour and we’ll go from there.”

Dr. Harrison and his wife Eunice came and they picked us up, took us to their house in Thornhill. They took us to the basement and it was all done up, and he said, “Listen, you are here as our guest. This house is your house. This is where you can sleep, you can go anywhere in the house you want, and what we have is yours.” So we stayed there. It was pretty tough because we’d never been in this situation, had never met these people before but they were just unbelievably wonderful people. We’d have dinner with them in the evening and they were religious, they’d read from the Bible and all that, which I was familiar with because I had gone to a Jesuit school

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in India and I had religion up to here, still do. We'd sit down at dinner and we'd talk. I said to him, "You know, I just contacted this airline that said they had a job and they've asked me to come for an interview but it's at Toronto airport," which was a long way away from where we were, and I said, "So I was wondering how I could get there." He said, "Don't worry about it. What time is your interview?"

They phoned around to find someone who could take us out there. I went and interviewed with this guy and he looked at my resume and said, "You know, we have a job for a person loading bags onto an airplane but that's the only job we have." He says, "You're overqualified for it and you don't have any Canadian experience." I said, "I'm really confused. I thought I had just come to a democracy after living in a third world country. I thought the system of democracy worked, you tell me what you have and I'll tell you whether I want it or not. Don't say you can't give me a job because you don't think I'll take it. Ask me first. Secondly, I told you I landed here four days ago and you're looking for Canadian experience, so I'm under the belief that it's something I can get in four days? I don't have it now but I will have it in four days, whatever it is you want." It was just the way he was acting. Then he said, "Okay, I can offer you a job as a baggage agent with the airline, it pays four hundred dollars a month." I said, "I'll take it." He said, "Okay, I'll send you the letter." I said, "You know what? I need to go home with the letter because I have a family who is stressed out and I have to go home with good news. You've given me good news, but I need a letter because we come from a country where if you don't have it in writing, it doesn't mean anything." He said, "Well my secretary is out." I just had this feeling that if I walked away this thing wasn't going to happen.

I walked outside his office, which was in the old Terminal 1 in Toronto, and there was a corridor and I walked down and there was an office and there was a receptionist typing away. I walked into the office and I said, "You don't know me and I don't know you, but I'm just going to ask you something. To give you a little background, I just landed here as a refugee. I have a wife and two kids at home and we are trying to find our way. The first thing is for me to get a job. I got a job offer but they are not in a position to type a letter and give it to me and I need to get that letter for the comfort of—so we can fulfill at least one of the things that we need to do." And she said, "You've got the letterhead?" I said, "No." She said, "Well, go get me the letterhead." I went back, got the letterhead, went back to her, gave it to her, and the guy drafted the letter and she typed it. She just typed it. She gave it to me, I went back, he signed the letter and I had my first job. The Canadian family was so ecstatic. We had to have a celebration, "Terry got a job!" All this kind of stuff.

He [Dr. Harrison] used to go around the hospital and tell all the doctors what we—then I said I needed to get an apartment because I wanted to be closer to work. We went and found a place where we wanted to live and they asked me for first month and last month's rent. I said, "I don't have that kind of money." They said, "Sorry we can't rent it to you." At dinner that night I was a little preoccupied and he said, "What's wrong?" I told him and he said, "Don't worry, I'll

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give you the money.” I said, “Well, it’s not right. You’ve done enough for us.” Every week, they used to give us twenty-six dollars as a family and I’d say to him, you know, “Here’s the twenty-six dollars. I know it doesn’t cover what you do but I...” He says, “No, you just keep it,” so I said, “Well, I guess if that’s what I have to do.”

I went back to Manpower in Willowdale and got an interview and went up to the person and said, “This is my case. I have a job and I am a refugee. I have a job but it doesn’t start for two weeks and I have to get an apartment but I’ve been asked for first and last month’s rent and I just don’t have the money, what do I do?” I don’t know whether I hit the right people or not, but she went back and talked to people, came back and said, “We’ll write you the money but you’ll have to sign up for it and it will have to be repaid.” I said, “Fine.” They gave me a cheque and I went and got the apartment and I told Dr. Harrison, “Now I’ve got to figure out how I furnish this place,” and he said, “You don’t worry about that.” He went to the hospital and told all these doctors what was happening. We stayed with them for about ten days and then we moved to the apartment. While we were with them, I was helping the church because they had a hundred families so I’d go around with the church truck and pick up furniture that was being donated and then I’d have to go and deliver it with other people. I was at the church all the time and I got to know the pastor and a few of the parishioners.

When we moved into the apartment, the church, through their basement, they gave us cutlery, crockery, and old stuff they had. Dr. Harrison went and talked to the doctors in his office. When we moved into the apartment, they’d be knocking at all times of night. One doctor would show up with a table and four chairs, one would come along with a mattress. That’s how we furnished our place. They would come at all times of night. All we had to say to Dr. Harrison—I remember when we moved into the apartment, one night he phoned up to find out how we were doing, and we said, “Well one of the girls seems to have a fever and so on.” Two hours later, there’s a knock on the door and he’s over there with a whole box of medicine. They were just tremendous people. They took my wife shopping and the wife said to my wife, “I’m going to take you shopping so you know how the grocery system works.” They went and she picked up all this stuff, and then when they took us to our apartment, they brought all the stuff up there.

Plus, the pastor of the church, when I was leaving, I went there to say, “Listen, I am moving away but I’m going to keep in touch. I just wanted to thank you.” He said, “Listen, I’m glad you came because I have this for you.” I open up the envelope and there’s eighty dollars in it, which in ’72 was a lot of money, right? And I said to him, “What is this.” He says, “This has been given to you by someone and they want you to have it.” I said, “I just can’t take it. Who’s given it to me?” He says, “I can’t tell you,” and I said, “Well then I’m not going to take it.” He said, “Well okay, it was Mr. Harrison but don’t you tell him that I told you.” This is the kind of people they were. At Christmastime, they’d take the kids over and buy toys for them. They looked after us. All those early days they were there all the time, we never felt alone. We didn’t know where

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everybody was, and they became my family. They still are very close friends with us. His wife has since died, but he comes into Vancouver every year and we get together. It was just tremendous.”