

## Immigrant youths share stories \ GEN Y: Youth express experiences through film

BY DIANA MEHTA, THE CANADIAN PRESS

Her father couldn't find a job, her mother was worried about the family's finances, and she just wanted to go back home.

The character 15-year-old Stella Aprilia had created for the silver screen was fictional, but her story was strikingly familiar.

The young newcomer to Canada remembers feeling bewildered by the culture of the country she was now expected to call her own.

"When I came to Canada, it was like a shock for me," says Aprilia, whose family immigrated to Toronto from the sweltering hustle and bustle of Jakarta, Indonesia.

Arriving when she was 12, Aprilia had to grapple with the loneliness that set in as she left her childhood home and the anxiety of a family trying to integrate into a new society. Frustrated with bottling up her feelings, she wanted to find a way to express herself.

"Us immigrants, sometimes we feel left out, because we weren't born here, we don't know much about Canada," she says. "To tell our stories is really important."

Aprilia found an outlet for her emotions with Voices -- the YMCA's newcomer youth film project. Run in Toronto during the summer, the free program teaches young newcomers how to channel their experiences with immigration and settlement onto film.

"I wanted to share my own story, about how hard it was for me," says Aprilia. "It was amazing, one of the best experiences of my life."

The project, which is in its third year, currently only serves the Greater Toronto Area but is already expanding its workshops as it accepts applications for this year's run.

In addition to technical training, Voices also features newcomer specialists who help the participants communicate their ideas and connect with each other.

The two-month course culminates in a film festival where the participants' pieces take centre stage.

"The primary objective was to give them an opportunity to share their story," says Carlos Hernandez, manager and co-creator of Voices.

"The filmmaking course is one part of it, but the settlement part is just as important."

The newcomers' films range from full-fledged English productions of up to 11 minutes to others in different languages with subtitles, and even some silent productions accompanied only by music.

Hernandez says the most common themes that crop up are loneliness and sadness, but ultimately hope as well.

"There are times when they've encountered those feelings, and they show what they did and what they endured," he says.

For Juan Sebastian Maldonado, the project was made personal by the well of emotion it tapped into.

The 24-year-old from Colombia, one of the few participants with prior film experience, put together a piece on a young immigrant's psychological battle between the desire to integrate into a new society and the urge to return to his country of origin.

The young filmmaker said projecting his own personal experiences onto the big screen for the first time increased the impact of the project.

"It was my turn to tell my story, write my own script," he said. "I believe arts are the best way to integrate people into society, especially youth."

For Maldonado, the extent to which the project gave free rein to the melange of emotions experienced by many young newcomers made it stand out as an experience.

"We were able to create without feeling that we had to hide something," he says. "That was amazing."

Allowing new immigrants, especially the young ones, to express themselves freely in such a way is key, says anthropologist Brian Given.

"Making a film is a very powerful experience for most people," says the professor who researches immigration and settlement at Ottawa's Carleton University. "It empowers in the sense that not only are you being given context, but other people are going to see it."

Young newcomers in particular need to deal with settling into a new country while simultaneously facing all the challenges that come with growing up, says Given, pointing out that it is adults who decide to uproot and move to a new country, and not their children.

"Kids are understandably in something of a panic," he says.

Consequently, any project which helps newcomers integrate into a community, whilst validating their own culture is important, says Given.

"We need to do everything we can to make our new Canadians feel like Canadians," he says. "You can do that in part by listening to them."

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