



## A ray of hope for new immigrants

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**BOB HEPBURN**

Patricia O'Connor is a petite, quiet-spoken woman who has made a big difference in the lives of hundreds of Canadian immigrants.

When I first met her earlier this week, O'Connor was surrounded by friends thanking and praising her for the work she is doing to give skilled newcomers a helping hand in finding jobs in Canada.

We were at an awards ceremony where O'Connor was one of five individuals and companies being honoured for their leadership in recruiting, retaining and promoting skilled immigrants in the Greater Toronto Area.

Several hundred people attended the event, presented by the Toronto Region Immigrant Employment Council (TRIEC), to give support to the winners.

O'Connor, who is the coordinator of field programming for the Internationally Educated Social Work Professionals Bridging Program at the G. Raymond Chang School of Continuing Education at Ryerson University, told the crowd that skilled immigrants must not give up hope and that employers should realize what a pool of talent foreign-trained workers form.

For years, Canadians have been reading sad tales about how highly skilled immigrants, many with advanced degrees or certificates, can't find jobs in their professions and are forced to drive taxis or clean hotel rooms to earn a living.

Unfortunately, those stories all too often are true.

Studies have found that 70 per cent of immigrants start their first job within six months of arriving here, but of those, only 42 per cent get a job in their intended occupation. Each year, Canada attracts about 250,000 immigrants, more than half of whom have a post-secondary degree or certificate.

Even Canadians born in this country and who later studied or worked abroad have trouble getting their foreign credentials accepted in Canada. This runs from speech language pathologists to teachers and others.

So bad is the problem in the Greater Toronto Area that in 2002 a conference of civic leaders identified employment barriers for immigrants as one of the region's biggest challenges.

Out of that conference emerged TRIEC, which works to find ways to better integrate skilled immigrants into the labour force and to encourage employers to take advantage

of the talents newcomers bring to this country.

Admittedly, it's a slow process.

Ratna Omidvar, chair of TRIEC's board of directors, says employers are only hurting themselves when they don't hire internationally educated and trained immigrants who speak languages other than English, know how to get things done in other cultures and can target our own ethnic markets.

TRIEC created the Immigrant Success Awards three years ago in the hope that the winners might inspire and provide insight for companies and groups wanting to know how to better recruit and train such workers.

For her efforts, O'Connor received the *Toronto Star* Immigrant Champion Award.

(Full disclosure: I was one of the nine members on the award selection committee and the *Star* is a media partner for the awards.)

In the past four years, the program O'Connor oversees has helped more than 100 internationally trained social workers move into jobs. More than a dozen past graduates of the program nominated her for the award.

Christine Okech is one of those graduates. She is originally from Kenya and now works with the Children's Aid Society of Hamilton. She said that while she was in the program she "felt for the first time nobody was judging or doubting me, and I met social workers from other countries and realized I was not alone."

In addition, O'Connor coordinates a network of more than 550 internationally trained social work professionals and organizes educational workshops for employers to raise awareness about the ways in which immigrant professionals can make valuable contributions to their organizations.

Clearly, O'Connor's program affects only a tiny fraction of the immigrants who face obstacles in having credentials recognized or finding suitable jobs.

But her example, and those of the other award winners, provides an inspiring model for employers who want to better their own companies – while offering a ray of hope for those highly skilled taxi drivers and hotel cleaners who still dream of a better life in Canada.

*Bob Hepburn's column appears Thursdays. [bhepburn@thestar.ca](mailto:bhepburn@thestar.ca)*