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Tales from the towers: A SPECIAL 10-PART SERIES ABOUT LIFE IN THORNCLIFFE PARK

In 1987, Rohinton Mistry wrote *Tales From Firozsha Baag*, a collection of interconnected short stories about the people living in one Bombay apartment complex. Inspired by those tales, Globe reporter JAN WONG immersed herself in a high-rise community in east central Toronto, a magnet for some of the most highly educated newcomers to Canada, so well known that in India, Pakistan and parts of the Middle East, people don't talk about moving to Toronto, they talk about moving to Thorncliffe Park. Today: Chapter One

By JAN WONG

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The blank white towers of Thorncliffe Park loom above the Don Valley Parkway like beacons of post-modern Canadiana. But their cool exteriors conceal a community brimming with ambition, hope and occasional despair.

In one tower, Gharzai Ranzooryar is dragging himself up after an overnight shift at Rabba Fine Foods. In Afghanistan, he was an ear, nose and throat specialist. In Toronto, he works two low-paying jobs to meet the monthly \$1,300 rent for an apartment that houses three generations of his family.

Now, with less than two hours' sleep, he is rushing off to the funeral of a relative who must, according to Islamic custom, be buried within 24 hours. After that, he'll dash across the city to take a provincial driving test. Then he'll head to his next job, cashier at a vitamin store on the Danforth. It's the closest that Gharzai, 34, can get to his former profession.

Thorncliffe Park, at a fork in the Don River, is a kilometre south of Eglinton Avenue. Bound by railway tracks and ravines and an industrial zone, it is mostly hidden from the commuters who whiz along Don Mills Road on their way downtown.

Yet in India, Pakistan and parts of the Middle East, people don't talk about moving to Toronto; they talk about moving to Thorncliffe Park.

In the past decade, this community has become a staging ground for some of Canada's most highly educated immigrants. Politicians and community workers claim Thorncliffe Park has the most PhDs per capita in the country. Statistics Canada data don't bear that out, but the neighbourhood does have a disproportionate number of medical doctors -- who mostly aren't allowed to practise.

At Thorncliffe Park, PhDs in genetic engineering serve doughnuts at Tim Hortons. Those with MBAs "volunteer" endlessly, hoping free labour will count toward that elusive, all-important qualification: Canadian experience. Meanwhile, people like Gharzai stand on their feet all night in a grocery store downtown.

"I was crying every night," the former doctor recalls, when he began there and realized his job included watching out for shoplifters, loiterers and drunks.

The quality of work, or lack thereof, is reflected in Thorncliffe Park's median income level, 38 per cent lower than Toronto as a whole. That's with many, including Gharzai, working two or more jobs.

Even so, only about 1,000 families in Thorncliffe Park are currently on any kind of welfare. And the neighbourhood's 35 high-rise and low-rise buildings include zero subsidized housing. Originally designed for 12,500 residents, more than 30,000 people now live here, forcing landlords to install extra hot-water tanks and heating systems. The only way many families can afford to pay market rents is by cramming two households into one.

Despite its population density, low income and high unemployment, Thorncliffe Park's crime rate is among the lowest in Toronto. The biggest headache is graffiti in one underground parking garage.

School officials, police and social workers all credit religious influence. Forty per cent of Thorncliffe Park residents are Muslim. The five-times daily prayers, the respect for elders and the intensive study of the Koran mean that drinking and drugs are rare, and youth gangs non-existent.

A century ago, the neighbourhood was a 600-acre livestock farm, dominated by a white clapboard southern-style mansion, grandly named Thorn Cliff. In the 1920s, investors turned it into a racetrack, a history still discernible in its U-shaped main road and side streets named Grandstand Place and Milepost Place.

In the 1960s, developers transformed the racetrack into one of Toronto's first high-rise communities, burying unsightly power lines and transformers. The intersection of King and Bay was a 10-minute commute away, made possible by a new parkway that had yet to become the Don Valley Parking Lot.

Over the years, the residents of Thorncliffe Park have morphed from WASP to Greek and Cypriot and now to Pakistani, Indian, Filipino, Chinese, Sri Lankan and Afghan. In the high-rise tower next to Gharzai's, for instance, William Xu, a business executive, and his wife, Julie Wu, a pianist and former entrepreneur, are speaking via webcam to their parents back in China.

Julie is the one who qualified for an immigration visa in the business category, and brought William along as a family member. Their first child is due in March. "If he gets another girlfriend," she jokes, patting her swelling belly, "I kick him back to China!" The baby is the culmination of their carefully laid plans. Both were born in China. Each worked overseas, where they met. She ran a successful clinic in Lahore. He was China's trade representative in Pakistan. They figured that between them they had enough talent, entrepreneurial smarts and fluency in English to make it in Canada.

But at 35, Julie has waited so long to have a baby that she is taking no chances with her pregnancy. All day, she rests at home, nibbling sunflower seeds, watching cable television and trying to fathom the attraction of *SpongeBob SquarePants* to their future child.

The job hunt is William's alone. But contrary to their expectations, he hasn't yet found work. This is despite a relentless nine-month search, several job-hunting workshops, 10 years

experience in international trade and two master's degrees, one in mechanical engineering from China and an MBA from Australia.

When they arrived in April, William and Julie had \$100,000 in savings. The sum takes the sharp edge off their panic, but it continues to dwindle. But they didn't come to Thorncliffe Park looking for handouts.

Nor did Abida Manzoor, a physiotherapist from Pakistan. "First, I want to get a job," she said the week after she got off the plane. "Preferably as an assistant physiotherapist. But I prepare myself to get any job."

Abida, 28, arrived in November. She and her husband and their toddler have crammed into a one-bedroom apartment with her sister-in-law and her three small children. The sleeping arrangements keep changing -- her husband is currently crashing on the couch in the living room, with the two women and all four children in the only bedroom.

The nadir was over Christmas when Abida caught the flu and passed it on to the kids. As a health-care provider, she had fully intended to get everyone flu shots. But what with opening a bank account, getting a library card, signing her husband up for English lessons and, of course, looking for a job, she never found time for inoculations.

Abida, who speaks fluent English, says she forced her husband to come to Canada. He doesn't speak English, and would have preferred staying in Faisalabad, where he ran a small grocery store. But she dreamed of a better life, for her, for him and for their two-year-old son.

In the dead of winter, she has dragged her husband to the local gas station and nearby Loblaws, trying to find him work. The week before Christmas, they went store to store, handing out résumés in the Eaton Centre, a place neither of them had ever been.

Abida, a woman with an unassailable sense of dignity, has applied in vain to flip burgers, wait on tables, sell shoes in a mall, even as she makes cold calls to every physiotherapy clinic she can find within a 90-minute bus ride from Thorncliffe Park. The \$15,000 in borrowed funds she and her husband brought with them is running out faster than they ever expected.

So many newcomers seem to be treading water in Thorncliffe Park, whether they have just arrived or have been here for years. Abida arrived just three months ago. William and Julie have been here for nine months. Gharzai anticipated at least a couple of years of slogging, but now it is four years going on five. And still, despite all their languages, their degrees, their experience, there is no decent job in sight.

Last week, Gharzai and his extended family took their citizenship exams. (The results are in the mail.) He believes Canada is the greatest country in the entire world. But secretly, in the depth of his despair, he wonders what difference citizenship will make.

In their previous lives, Gharzai, Abida and William and Julie all lived in spacious homes. They rarely, if ever, took a public bus. Servants washed their clothes, swept their floors, weeded their flowerbeds and tended to their babies. But now these newcomers have given it all up to move to a former racetrack -- and stake everything on a new life.

Coming up

February 7: Abida Manzoor, a physiotherapist from Pakistan, volunteers at a clinic and discovers the joy of chocolate-glazed doughnuts and the pain of a Canadian winter.

February 14: Sakina Iqbal, Abida's sister-in-law, is trapped all day in a crowded apartment with four small children and her in-laws from Pakistan.

February 21: Abida Manzoor makes cold calls in a cold land.

February 28: Amir Kassam, Abida's landlord, remembers being a former Thorncliffe Park tenant himself.

March 6: Gharzai Ranzooryar, who was a doctor in Afghanistan, holds down two low-paying jobs to keep his three-generation family together.

March 13: Gharzai's sister, Durkhanai Ranzooryar, embraces her Muslim identity at the University of Toronto.

March 20: Gharzai's seven-year-old daughter, Deewa Ranzooryar, is an all-Canadian kid at the largest elementary school in North America.

March 27: William Xu and Julie Wu, an entrepreneurial couple from China, whose first baby is due this week of March, pin their hopes on a single internship at GE.

April 3: Gordon Membery and Frances Haist, a retired WASP couple, reflect on the changing neighbourhood.

Next week: Chapter Two



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