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**ADDRESS AT THE INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE INSTITUTE
REFLECTIONS ON LIVING TOGETHER AS NEIGHBOURS**

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Thank you and good evening everyone.

I am thrilled to be here with so many distinguished guests to share some reflections on “Living Together as Neighbours” in a global community.

Whenever I speak on such topics, I cannot help but to reflect on my own personal experiences. Almost 40 years ago, in August of 1972, I arrived at Pearson airport as an international student. I left everything behind in my birth country of Egypt, to pursue a higher education.

I was an experienced traveler, but had never been to Canada, and wasn't really sure of what to expect. I wasn't just coming here as a tourist, I was coming here for a few years to study and to live.

I knew a lot about the country from what I had researched: I knew that it was well-known for its higher education, but more importantly, I knew that it was a nation that welcomed and embraced diversity.

I remember when I arrived, I was experiencing all sorts of emotions...excitement, concern, and naturally, some worry.

Was I going to adjust? What was going to happen to me?

But after completing both my Master's degree and my PhD at McMaster University in Hamilton, something happened that I did not expect. I decided to stay. To put it mildly, I felt embraced by the country, by the people, and by the system. And not once have I ever looked back.

Not only did I make a good decision...I am convinced I made the best decision of my life (other than marrying my wife of course).

When somebody leaves his or her country in pursuit of higher education, they are usually driven by two things: one, academic excellence and the ability to attend a great institution for higher knowledge. And two, the opportunity to evolve into what I call a citizen of the world. That's the ability to grow as a person and learn about different ideas and perspectives so that one can then share those experiences with others.

Many international students, including myself, chose Canada because post-secondary education is important and so highly valued and regarded. In my opinion, Canada has one of the best education systems in the world.

As President of York University, I am proud to lead Canada's third largest and a leading interdisciplinary research and teaching institution.

There is no question that we are a University with strong moral values – values like equity, social responsibility, accessibility and fairness.

These aren't just values we talk about...they are values we truly believe in.

These values have shaped who we are, as a university, and have also shaped who our students become.

One of things that I find so fascinating at York, and what makes us so special, is the fact that we are an international university, with students, faculty and staff who come from all over the world.

With a population of 65,000, and 250,000 alumni, our community can trace their roots to more than 155 countries worldwide.

In fact, 54 per cent of our population self-identify as a visible minority, 33 per cent are first generation Canadians, 59 per cent are female, and even more astounding, 45 per cent are the first in their families to attend University.

My job is to eliminate obstacles that impede participation and success, and enforce a deep sense of belonging and pride.

My responsibility is to inspire our students towards their goals; to take the time to understand and appreciate different perspectives and orientations, and provide a nurturing and welcoming environment for all.

As a large university, inclusivity makes good business sense; it is a catalyst for positive change, and it's of strong moral importance.

What ultimately works to our advantage is that York University is situated in the heart of the GTA...a hub for multiculturalism...and in the York region, which according to Census Canada, is one of the fastest growing regions in the nation.

Our diverse population is our strength, which makes our city such a great place to live...and where the opportunities are limitless.

What many in our community don't realize is that this diversity exposes our students to a high level of differing opinions and points of view on all issues of studies and of national and world affairs.

By learning within such a diverse community, and from some of the best professors, our students gain a better understanding of the world in which they live.

They become citizens of the world.

We continue to work on an ambitious plan for internationalization.

Part of York's strategy is to increase internationalization in the programs we offer so that students become even more exposed to world cultures either through the classroom or on international exchanges.

Whatever career our students choose, they will invariably deal with other countries or travel to other countries.

Evolving as a person with exposure to different cultures will provide them with a great advantage in the future.

Think about it...if you have people looking at a problem from a variety of perspectives, be it disciplines or backgrounds, they have a better chance of reaching an optimum and innovative solution.

And that is why diversity in the work place makes good business sense.

Diversity in the classroom makes for a better learning environment and cultural diversity makes for a more tolerant and peaceful society.

This is why we, at York University, are committed to interdisciplinary research and education.

We are talking about what it means to examine real issues and real problems from a variety of perspectives.

Our students learn to address societal issues through a diverse lens, and as a result, this interaction provides them with a broad range of approaches to addressing real world problems.

And that's why the work of the Intercultural Dialogue Institute is so relevant to our daily life.

The goal to promote respect and mutual understanding among all cultures and faiths through partnerships is very much what this city needs and what York University is all about.

I congratulate you on your continued efforts to build a society where people can live in peaceful existence, and we are thrilled to be a part of it.

Thank you.