

Community spreads word on diversity issues

BY KIM ZARZOUR

Special to Focus

He was a professional back home, but a 'nobody' here.

The South Asian man struggled, as an immigrant in York Region, to maintain control with a family of teenagers who were struggling with new-Canadian pressures of their own until, lacking employment or dignity, he could struggle no more.

And he killed himself. Today, his widow is toiling to keep the family together, working 18-hour shifts at a factory job to put food on the table while her children flounder.

"These people are in crisis," said Naushad Hirji, chair of the Social Services Network, recounting this family's story recently. "They need help today or the family is going to disintegrate. These are the kind of very real issues we face."

Raising a family is tough at the best of times. It's tougher in a recession. It's tougher still if you're an immigrant from South Asia, coping with discrimination, isolation, financial worries and cultural pressures.

This is why the SSN has produced a documentary outlining the issues faced by York Region's burgeoning South Asian community.

The 40-minute video, along with a powerpoint presentation revealing the diverse religious and cultural backgrounds among South Asians, were presented in Markham recently to 50 representatives of human service agencies and the local community.

The project, *Layers of Diversity Within the South Asian Community*, was created this summer with the help of 10 youth volunteers and funding from the Ministry of Citizenship and Culture.

The students interviewed 35 people in six days to learn about the diversity, problems and possible solutions for Ontario's largest visible minority group.

"There are a range of issues in the community that are not being addressed right now ... issues like poverty, homelessness, youth unemployment, employment equity.

These issues here are not going to go away," Hirji said.

"There's no quick fix. The only fix is if we identify the problems. But sometimes the community has a habit of putting those issues under the carpet. We need to tell them ... these are no longer taboos."

United Way of York Region CEO Daniele Zanotti, quoted in the video, pointed out concerns of particular importance to South Asians: economic independence, integration and helping youth grow up strong.

The video features South Asians describing their transition into Canadian society, coping with discrimination and cold winters, figuring out public transit, working at call centres despite professional credentials, struggling to get references for apartment rentals and to understand a foreign school system.

Stress and long working hours can lead to health problems, said Dr Charanjit Bambra, the SSN's then executive director. In six or seven years, Bambra predicted, "the hospitals and health services are simply not going to be able to cope".

For more information, to download a booklet about the South Asian community or to link to the Layers of Diversity video, visit www.socialservicesnetwork.org

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