

Pathways to Belonging and Influence:

Strategies and skills of the flourishing Canadians, born abroad

"Get out there and connect with people."

A conversation with Charles Osuji (Transcript)

Interviewer: Welcome to Pathways to Belonging and Influence: Strategies and skills of the flourishing Canadians, born abroad. This series of recorded conversations is a joint project between Bow Valley College and the Calgary Region Immigrant and Employment Council, or CRIEC. These conversations feature role models in the Calgary community who were not born in Canada, but have successfully established themselves and are flourishing members of Canadian society. They share with us their stories, their insights into establishing oneself in Canada and their strategies for success.

I am here today with Charles Osuji. Charles is originally from Nigeria and is owner of Osuji and Smith Lawyers in Calgary. Welcome Charles, thank you for joining us today Thank you, Jennifer, I appreciate it, and thank you for agreeing to share your story of your path to becoming a flourishing member of Canadian society.

Charles: Thank you, I appreciate that.

Interviewer: So, Charles could you start off by telling us a little bit about your background?

Charles: Okay, my name is Charles Osuji as you have indicated. I am originally from Nigeria. I immigrated back in 2011 to Canada. I have seven siblings, family of ten, and I'm the seventh child out of eight. I was called to the Nigerian Bar in 2010 and came to Canada a year afterwards. I challenged my NCA exams in 2012 and I articulated with Smith Law office in 2013. I was called to the Bar in 2014 and I continued with Smith Law Office as an associate. In 2016 I became a named partner with the firm and the firm was renamed Osuji and Smith Lawyers, and in 2017, I bought the practice from my partner.

Interviewer: Is there one driving force that led you to where you are today?

Charles: My family. I come from a family of successful professionals, and when I was born, I was pretty much born into an adult family. My immediate older sister was eleven years older than I was when I was born. *Okay.* So I had a lot of role models to look up to and they are really doing well in their chosen professions. So family was a huge influence on my career. I had a lot of support from mentors and I had a lot of support from my teachers back in the university and in law school.

Interviewer: Now you said you had a lot of mentors. Was there anyone in particular who influenced you, mentored you when you were here in Canada?

Charles: Yes, in 2013 when I was looking for an articling position, I was introduced to CRIEC and in particular I was introduced to Bruce Randall. Bruce Randall is the Executive Director of CRIEC, and I had a meeting with Bruce and we sat down together and kind of mapped out what the strategy would be for article search. And Bruce has been the guiding force since 2013 to date. He was able to introduce me to lots of folks in the industry; was able to let me understand how it works here in Canada. So the mentorship from Bruce and CRIEC in general was formidable for me. It was very critical and it was very helpful in my career journey in Calgary.

Interviewer: Was there any particular lesson that you learned from Bruce that was really helpful for you?

Charles: Before I met Bruce, I had not met a lawyer in Calgary. *Okay.* So here I was sitting across a lawyer of over 25 years of experience. So for one I had that validation that someone saw me as a lawyer, and that someone was a veteran lawyer like Bruce. And Bruce knows a lot of people in Calgary. Bruce knows a lot of lawyers, a lot of, you know, industry states people, so to speak. So Bruce was able to introduce me to these folks, and he was also able to help me out with my first interview, with Jim. Jim is the previous owner of the firm. *Wow!* So the day before the interview with Jim, I had a mock interview with Bruce Randall. *Oh wonderful.* So that should tell you the kind of help I got from him in my journey.

Interviewer: So, do you think that mock interview really helped you, absolutely, in your first interview?

Charles: Absolutely, there's a lot of cultural differences between Nigeria and Calgary. Back in Nigeria, if you should go for an interview for a position as a lawyer, a law student, you will be expected to answer questions with respect to legal principles and legal definitions and all of that. But I quickly realized, after my mock interview with Bruce Randall, that most of the law firms here would be looking for fit, would be looking for someone that would fit in with their firm's culture. *Okay,* and not more legal knowledge. So that was a critical lesson I learned from Bruce at the mock interview. So the following day at the interview with Jim, I felt it was more or less a continuation of the previous mock interview and most of the information I received from Bruce was confirmed during my interview with Jim.

Interviewer: So without that connection with Bruce and that mock interview, you might have been surprised, yes, at that first interview.

Charles: Absolutely, I would have maybe flunked it, you know, but it worked out well.

Interviewer: So, you obviously have a very positive attitude. Do you think that that positive attitude helped you get to where you are today?

Charles: Yes, yes, I have an older brother, Joseph Osuji. He is the oldest in the family. He is very positive, I feed off from him all the time. He continuously told me that it was possible. You know, because when I came here, it looked impossible to transition, challenge the exams, get an articling position, work as a lawyer, get called to the bar, you know. But he told me that it was possible, and I believed him. I believed everything was possible, and I still believe everything is possible.

When I was negotiating with Jim, buying the practice and the building, I had cold feet. *Well that's a big step, to purchase a law firm and the building.* Yes, I had cold feet. Again my brother said "It is possible, do it. This is the best time to do it. Don't hesitate and let this opportunity pass you by." So, positivity plays a huge, significant role in success.

Interviewer: When you got cold feet, or when you were nervous or when you saw all the steps that you had to take to reach your goals was there something you told yourself to keep yourself going?

Charles: In moments like that, I would, you know, connect with Bruce. I would connect with my brother, alright, and they would always reassure me. Cause these people see what I don't see in myself sometimes. *Yes.* They see more than Charles. So, I would always connect with them, and get the reassurance that I needed and more or less the validation that I needed.

I went through a period where I needed lots of assurances because I was taking a very significant step in my career that would change a lot. It would change my life for good, you know, hopefully, so I told myself I was going to do it, I told myself how far I had come and, and this is yet another major decision I had to make to get to the next level in my career.

Interviewer: So you had two people supporting you, one from Canada, yes, and one from your family, yes. So you got positive messages from both of them. Did it help you that you had someone from Canada as well as someone from your family so they could see what the challenges might be or see how you fit into your new role?

Charles: Yeah, absolutely. Someone from family for sure. He understands me. He has already known me since I was born, *right*, and then someone from Canada that has been in the industry for about two decades. So hearing from these two folks that this was possible meant a lot to me.

And then Jim as well, my partner, the previous owner of the firm. *Yes.* He believes in me more than I believe in myself. So he told me I was going to be a roaring success, I would be one of the top lawyers in five years. And he believes in me and I fed off that belief and I became more confident in the choices that I made.

Interviewer: Do you think there's anything that you would tell someone who just arrived to Canada and is just starting out, is there something that you think you would tell them to help them on their journey?

Charles: Yeah, two things. It is possible to be successful here. Canada presents with lots of options and there are so many opportunities here. And, secondly, get out there and connect with organizations like CRIEC. Connect with mentors and people that would give you the advice that you need. You cannot succeed alone.

Interviewer: What about networking? You want that mentorship to help you, someone to guide you, and you mentioned earlier that Bruce connected you with people in the legal profession in Calgary.

Charles: Networking is invaluable. It is priceless. When I came here I felt naked in the sense that I didn't have any professional network. *Okay.* I had left everything and everyone that I knew back in Nigeria, the professors, the teachers, my colleagues, my classmates and friends, family as well. Networking kind of builds a different kind of support group for yourself. You are able to understand people's ideas and tricks and success tips as well. You can't read that from materials or from literature, you have to actually meet real people with real life stories. People succeed differently, in different ways, so the more people you meet, the more you understand the various ways to succeed. So networking is very important.

Interviewer: I noticed that you also are active in the community and you also, now, mentor at CRIEC. How does being active in the community and helping others make you feel like you belong in Canada or increase your sense of being integrated into society?

Charles: Given my particular career journey and given the benefit of mentorship I've received and given the guidance I've received from organizations like CRIEC and mentors like Bruce Randall, I feel obligated to give back to the community. I feel that I should share my story with as many people as possible, to inspire people as well. I remember how important it was for me to meet with Bruce, when I was looking for articles. I was working in a warehouse, in a factory and here I was sitting across a lawyer with over, 25 years of practice, so that meant a lot to me. *Right, that was the connection to where you wanted to be.* Yes, absolutely, that meant a lot to me.

So what I do with Bruce and through CRIEC, there's a program called Observership Program. So, internationally trained lawyers come to my firm every other month for like two-three days and observe how things are done. And I feel that it's very good, especially for those internationally trained professionals for them to know that someone that has gone through this process has got to this point in their career, and it shows that it's possible. It shows that with the right people in your life and with the right amount of focus and determination you can make progress in your career journey. *What a wonderful opportunity for them.* Yeah, it is. *And how wonderful for you, I feel good, to share part of your journey with them.* Yeah, I feel good doing it because I know exactly what they're going through.

Coming to Canada is more of a psychological transition than a physical transition. It's not really just about entering a plane and coming to Canada, there's more to it. You need to convince yourself that you can make good of this decision to leave your comfort zone of

Charles: wherever you're coming from to a new country, so you feel that you must justify that decision. And, so when you come here and you see someone that went through that same process and is doing okay for himself or herself, that is reinforcing, right, that is encouraging. And that encouragement is what some people need to make progress.

Interviewer: Now, you mentioned earlier that in 2011 when you arrived, you were working at a factory. Yup. So you had to take a job at the beginning, Absolutely, so that you would have an income. How did you feel when you, as a lawyer in Nigeria, came here and started working in a factory?

Charles: It was a humbling experience. And I am very appreciative of that experience. I actually worked for more than maybe 40-50 factories. I was all over the place. At some point I had almost ten T4s in one year, right. So I connected with lots of staffing agencies and they were sending me back and forth to different factories to work. I knew it was temporary, I just needed to get my feet on the ground. I knew it was a step, more or less, a step along the way. So, I didn't feel bad doing it. I still needed to support my family back home, I still needed to save some money for my exams and I still needed to survive as well, right? It was a good experience. Those are the experiences that you have in life and when you get to where you want to be, you make sure that you work as hard as possible to sustain your success, yes, so that you don't go back to where you started.

Interviewer: Was there a point where you, after you came to Canada and you were working, and you were getting towards your goals, was there a point where you were like, Yes! This is the place, I belong here.

Charles: Yes, when I was called to the bar in 2014. *Okay.* That was that moment. When I realized that this was a good decision. *Yes.* So, on the day of my bar call, I knew I had arrived in Canada.

Interviewer: So, is there one message you would leave for someone who is just arriving and might think, oh, this is going to be a lot of work?

Charles: Canada is a country where hard work is rewarded. Focus, determination, hard work: these are virtues that you need to succeed in Canada, and you have to be patient. Sometimes it may take two, three years, sometimes four years or five years, but if you are focused, you are going to get there. Don't come here with the mindset that you're going to be successful here in one year. Canada encourages patience, endurance, resilience, perseverance. So you have to have these virtues and understand that success is, is going to come, but it's going to take a while. And it's for your own good, because during the time you are struggling and branching out and connecting with people, you are building yourself, you are growing so that when you become successful, that success will be sustainable.

Interviewer: Thank you, you're welcome, for sharing your story and your positivity and your message of how to achieve success. We really appreciate you coming in. Thank you very much Jennifer, I appreciate it.

Interviewer: Thank you for joining us for this conversation with Charles Osuji in the Pathways to Belonging and Influence series. Join us for our other conversations with flourishing Canadians born abroad to learn strategies for establishing yourself in Canada