

Pathways to Belonging and Influence:

Strategies and skills of the flourishing Canadians, born abroad

"If you keep the doors open, the opportunities will come."

A conversation with Esmail Bharwani

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.

In this conversation, we will be speaking with Esmail Bharwani. Esmail is originally from Tanzania and after a very successful career in Canada as an accountant, lawyer, radio personality, university instructor and a writer, he has established a family foundation to help others achieve success through education. Today he will share some of his story and his journey to success with us. Welcome Esmail.

Esmail: Thank you.

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

Esmail: I immigrated to Canada in 1973, and practiced accounting from '73 on until 1999, semi-retired, went to law school, turned lawyer in 2004 was called to the bar in 2005 and practiced law until 2017. I am now semi-retired, and so it has been a long career in law and accounting and I've enjoyed it very much.

Interviewer: So, when you first arrived in Canada, what are some of the road blocks or challenges that you faced when you tried to establish yourself as an accountant?

Esmail: When I came to Canada, I had an accounting designation, not university degrees, and naturally my easier course would have been to go into accounting as that was my profession before and where I had the knowledge and expertise. But the first question I faced was, "You have an English qualification. We would like to see a Canadian qualification before we can hire you at the level you are qualified for." So it was a question of over-qualification but with no Canadian qualification, *right*, and that was a challenge for me because I wasn't willing to accept a lower paid job, and so that was the first road block I had.

Interviewer: Okay, and so you had an English qualification because you studied in England before coming to Canada, correct?

Esmail: That's correct. I did go to England in 1965 from Tanzania, spent three years in Newcastle and secured an accounting designation called ACC at that time. But still there was a challenge, and for that reason I had to obtain the CGA designation which would have been the easiest way to get my Canadian qualification. If I wanted to become a chartered accountant at that time, I would have to go through the program as well as do articling, and the challenge I had was that I had to support a family, *yes*, and so I needed to work in order to support the family which is a typical challenge every newly landed immigrant would be facing. *Yes, absolutely.* The best option at that time was to go for the CGA program and I was fortunate that the CGA was able to grant me certain exemptions and I had to only work through the last level of the professional designation program. *Right.* I had a similar challenge when I wanted to do my PhD program, that foreign qualifications are being questioned.

Interviewer: So, you arrived here, you had to support a family, you were faced with challenges in having your designation granted to you in Canada so you could continue to work at the same level. What is it about your attitude towards being successful in Canada, or your practices that helped you get through that period?

Esmail: I learned very quickly that, getting established in Canada, one needs to be flexible, you just can't come with a set mind that I'm going to go into a particular job and start working in the profession or the kind of work that I've done before. You need to be flexible and I think I learned that quickly, that just counting on one single profession is not going to get me too far. So, to be established, I then thought about what other things can I do, using my existing skills and knowledge? How can I exploit that knowledge and skills in doing something else that will augment or complement what I prefer to do so I could keep my profession going, *yes*, but I could supplement the income with other sources of income and also create other opportunities in the long run? *Okay.* Because when I started back in the early days, I never realized that that is going to work a long way in the future by opening doors to other opportunities. And so, I looked for teaching positions, beginning with voluntary teaching, teaching for colleges, later I moved to university teaching and it kind of blossomed from there, *wonderful*, and I saw the opportunities open up as people begin to recognize your expertise.

Interviewer: Absolutely. So, you weren't complacent once you got your career going. Would you say you were always looking for new opportunities?

Esmail: One should never, ever be complacent because, I'll give you an example. When I started my accounting practice in 1976, I was doing very well for a few years and then we saw the economic downturn in the late 70s, early 80s, when clients were not doing very well. Some of them lost their businesses, some of them were seeing a decline in business revenue, and I realized that the future is going to be challenging, and so I started branching out into other fields of work such as, into the tax area, income tax area to learn more about taxation, and

Esmail: consulting area, uh, because I knew I had the knowledge and skills to assist others in what they're doing. Such as, people were looking at that time to establish their own businesses because having lost their jobs, they had no other source of revenue or income to rely on, so they needed to find something else to do, and the easiest thing at that time was to start your own business and use your consulting skills or your other skills to run retail businesses or service-oriented businesses. And so, I saw the opportunity to go into teaching. I approached the University of Calgary and said, could you give me a trial to teach one session and see how I do?

Interviewer: When the economy went down, you had to find a way to do other things so you started teaching, so you really couldn't just give up. Being resilient really helped you on your path to success.

Esmail: Yes, the late 70s or early 80s as many would have told you, or you must have heard about it. Not only I suffered financially through that downturn, but many of my clients, many of my friends, many others, who I have known had gone through the difficult time period. And if you accepted that lack of success or that slow down as a deterrent for the progress, or if you had given up hope because of that, then I would not have been able to do what I have done since then. I had to be strong, I said to myself, if I can't get revenue through practice because the economy is down, I've got to go teaching and started writing for publications, I wrote for over 20 or so different publications. I started with one, Calgary Herald, and then it opened up my doors to go to other publications. I wrote for a number of publications around the country.

I think it's important for people to realize that, if you give up hope early, if you take lack of success, uh, as a failure, then it limits your scope from advancing. It, it discourages you. If you are willing and prepared to, to rise up and look for other options, one would find options. You just have to look at different resources, uh, talk to people. Go networking, read up online, there are opportunities all the time in different areas of entrepreneurship as well. Uh, when you run into difficulties, you've got to be strong and you've got to work for it. You can't give up. There's no going back. You're already in Canada, you want to establish yourself here, uh, keep your focus right here, and then you work until you succeed.

Interviewer: Okay, so you need to focus all your energy on moving forward and what you can do here in Canada?

Esmail: That's the way I did it and I think that's what paid off because I had nothing to look back to. Our family was all here. We were determined to make a living here and we look, took it as this is our home and we don't have an option left. We've got to survive here. And if it means taking three jobs, I used to be practicing, writing newspaper columns, teaching for university, and also doing part time studies to get additional qualifications. Sometimes people don't realize that when you do networking, you talk to others, when you research, a simple idea can give you a lot of hint into what you can do. *This is true.* So, the idea is to never ever give up, just work on it.

Interviewer: So, you talked about networking, was there anyone who mentored you or helped you get going here in Canada?

Esmail: I don't have a specific individual who mentored me. At the time when I came here in 1973, there weren't many government resources for assistance like you have today for newly landed immigrants. Um, there was not a large community of ours here. There were only three or four hundred Ismailis at that time, and so there wasn't a big support group for us to work with. So the support I received was from neighbours, from friends, from business associates. I had left my doors open. People were always out there ready to offer help. If you show the right attitude, that you're willing to be flexible, that you're willing to work hard, that you're willing to integrate with others without creating a lot of noise, I think there's a lot of opportunities.

Interviewer: You mentioned one thing that I think is really important, you said you kept the doors open.

Esmail: I think if you are open to suggestions, you will always find people willing to give you suggestions. But it is a matter of how you're perceived, how you are looked upon, what kind of impression you create, and what kind of an attitude you show to people. Your conversation, your body language, your conduct of life on a daily basis, your lifestyle, I think those all count towards someone's desire to help you.

Interviewer: How has the feeling of belonging here in Canada, and the ability to influence the community played a role in your success?

Esmail: I think the sense of belonging came to me from the way I was received, the way I got assistance from various people throughout my life here, in my profession, at home. We have the same neighbours, you know, we have the same old friends. And I think when you get that level of affection and assistance from everyone around you, in all walks of life here, you get the sense that you're not different, you're just part of them. And you begin to then feel the way you should be feeling, that this is your home and all people are same. It doesn't matter where you came from and you belong here, like they belong here. And once you, you feel that way, your attitude changes towards everything.

After 44 years being here, I'm totally integrated and part of society, but I always felt I belonged here. And that helped me think about giving back and I have been a volunteer all my life, but I am now more focused on helping others. I've set up a foundation, family foundation called Esmail, Safana, Farzana Fayaz Bharwani Foundation. And I wanted to have it, the structure in place so that the legacy and the assistance would remain forever. So, what I've done is that I'm trying to assist students through granting them awards, through all of the educational institutions in Calgary because I feel that if I was successful because of education and the right attitude, then if I can help others who have similar attitudes and, and similar focus and are willing to work hard, then my life is worth living, because I am giving back what someone else was willing to give me as well. And I think that's, that has really made me very happy, and I'm saying the happiness in life comes from helping others.

Interviewer: That's wonderful advice and thank you very much, Esmail, for sharing your strategies for becoming a flourishing member of society in Canada. Your example I think will inspire many, many people. Thank you for joining us. Thank you.

Interviewer: Thank you for joining us in this conversation with Esmail Bharwani 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.