

Pathways to Belonging and Influence:

Strategies and skills of the flourishing Canadians, born abroad

"Embrace Canada, Canada Embraces You."

A conversation with Narmin Ismail-Teja

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.

Today we'll be talking with Narmin Ismail-Teja. Narmin is originally from Kenya, and she's a principal at Impact at Work. In her consulting practice, she focuses on diversity and inclusion and on helping organizations create positive, effective environments where all are involved. Welcome Narmin, thank you for joining us today to share your story and strategies for becoming a flourishing member of society in Canada.

Narmin: Thanks for having me.

Interviewer: Could you start off by telling us a little bit about your background?

Narmin: I arrived from Kenya in 1973 as a young child and here we were. *And you started out again.* This was going to be life from here on in, and so my parents, my sister and I just made it work.

Interviewer: And can you tell us a bit about what you are doing now?

Narmin: My consulting practice is a bit varied, but really focuses on diversity and inclusion, working with workplaces, helping them understand how we create environments that are respectful and people have a sense of belonging. And so whether that is private sector, not for profit, public sector, it can be workplaces, it can be teams, it can be teams in the community. How do we just create a community we want to live in? And, other areas of work are strategy, organizational culture, team building, leadership, all tied back to just creating healthier environments for people to be able to live the kind of life they want to live. *Making Calgary a better place to be!* I hope so! *What a great job to have.* It is!

Interviewer: So, when you were moving forward to your career, yeah, did you encounter any challenges?

Narmin: Sure, well there's questions about whether people believe in you, *mm hm*. There's also questions about do you believe in yourself? And sometimes the believing in yourself I think is reinforced by how you understand others believing in you, *mm hm*. So, if others believe in me, it becomes easy. If it feels like others don't believe in me, it becomes that much more challenging. So, I think there's always those things, and bias, assumptions about who I am and what I might have to bring, how I might contribute to the work that's being done. Absolutely, I think that's been part of the conversation, always, and I suspect it continues to be. And some of it is about being a newcomer, some of it is about gender, there's all kinds of layers to that. Some of it is in how you dress and how you present yourself, right? *Yes, exactly*. So people make assumptions. So yes, have there been some of those challenges? To me it's always been about, so what do I do with that? I can have control over my attitude and my behavior, and so how do I engage with people to demonstrate that I do have something to bring, *mm hm*, that I do want to be part of creating the change, and if I don't have something to bring, or there's a gap, I'm actually really keen to learn. You know that for me, that's always about how do I present myself? And it means take a chance sometimes and stretch a little bit further than I'm ready to stretch, *yes*, and, it's amazing, the world works for you. *Yes, if you let it, right?* If you let it, if you let it.

Interviewer: Now have there been people or mentors who've helped you on your journey to your career?

Narmin: Absolutely, I don't think any one of us is successful in any way on our own, I think you always have people that shape your life; my parents for making probably some huge sacrifices in coming here and laying the groundwork for me to be able to see the world in the way I do. My attitudes, my values got shaped by them, so that's been a huge part for sure. And then I think at every stage in my life I can think of at least one or two or three people that were, in some ways turning points, you know. They were there at that right moment, or they said the right thing, or they opened the right door. And so, having others be part of this journey's been what it's about. One of the things I've learnt from that is then I too have a responsibility for doing that for others. There's been so many people that have contributed to who I am, I hope I can do that for a number of people. So, it is about now my responsibility to open those doors, to create those opportunities, to give somebody a helping hand, *mm hm*, as others did for me. People have given me a helping hand, people have given me a swift kick, people have moved me in a particular direction, and now I need to do that.

Interviewer: When you said a swift kick, sometimes we don't recognize that what people are doing is helping us, mm hm, and we're not quite ready to respond, but when we do, we discover that it's helpful.

Narmin: Right, and it's again, that person's got more faith in me than I do at that moment. And if I can see it that way then I need to take the leap. And my experience is I've actually worked harder in those cases because I'm not going to let them down. *Oh yes.* I might let myself down, but if someone's put their neck out for me, if someone's opened the door for me, if someone's created this opportunity, boy, I can't let them down. *No, no.* I, I do whatever I need to do to make sure that it works.

Interviewer: *And also, it helps you when you can see that other people have that belief in you, that faith in you. You're going to work harder, but then you're going to change the way you look at yourself. Yeah, Hopefully you adopt their belief of what you can do.*

Narmin: You do, you do, and you know, there's a number of times I look back a few years and I think, wow! Why was I scared to do that, why was I worried about doing that? It got done! It worked! But at that moment, I couldn't see it in myself, but somebody else could. And so, I think trusting others when they are trying to give you that extra bit of a nudge to go forward. That has really worked for me.

And taking risks, right, yes, allowing others to help us take risks?

If we're not taking risks and if we're not, if you're not feeling that butterfly feeling in your stomach of oh my God, what am I doing here? How did I get myself into this, why did I say yes? Then I'm clearly not growing. If I'm always feeling comfortable, then I'm just status quo. *That's true,* and some people might be quite okay with that, so I don't have a judgement of that, but for me, that's not enough. For me, it's I want to be in an ongoing growth mode which means I need to continue to feel that queasy feeling of, oh my God, can I do it? And then prove to myself I can, and then on to the next queasy feeling of can I do it? *Wonderful,* and move forward, right? And to fail at something, that's okay too. *Mm hm.* If I fail at something, the question I want to ask myself is what did I learn from it? It might be, don't ever do it again, *mm hm,* which is fine, *mm hm.* Or this is really important to me and it's aligned with my values, mm hm, and I failed, but I want to try again, *right.* So if I want to try again, what do I need to be better prepared with for the next go around? *Mm hm.* So, go off and learn what I need to learn, and come back if it is important enough to me. If it's not, great, tried it, didn't work, let's try the next thing. *Fabulous, what a great attitude to face life with.*

Interviewer: *So, you talked a little bit about failure. What about success? Different people have different views of success. What does success mean to you or how do you view success?*

Narmin: To me success is having the opportunity and the skills to be able to have some kind of impact, in the community that positively moves the community. And, success is being able to create an environment, create a culture, a helping hand to help somebody else be successful. That to me is the real definition of success. It's not what I accomplish, it's did I do something that created a situation, an environment that allowed someone else, hopefully more than one, to be able to make their leap? *So in a sense, success for you causes a chain reaction of, of success.* Absolutely, and it should have a multiplier effect. *That's fabulous.* And that's why I say not one person, but if I can do something that's going to make it easier for a number of people and then we get that chain happening. *Mm hm, wow!* That's how we change systems, that's how we change communities for me. *That's powerful.*

Interviewer: Now, you talk about getting involved in the community and I know you're really involved in the community, you do a lot in the community, you work hard in your career, but giving back is a big part of your life. How does that affect your career when you're, you're also giving your time volunteering?

Narmin: So first I'm going to challenge the giving back. *Okay.* I personally don't like that term. *Okay.* Because to me giving back means it's contingent on me getting something, and I think I already get a lot just by being a member of this community. And just like in a family where there are privileges and there are responsibilities, by being a member of this community, I have a level of responsibility. So for me it's not about giving back, it's just about being part of contributing to building the kind of community I want to live in, and it's not contingent on anything.

How do I make it work? Well, I'm fortunate that working in a consulting firm, I have the privilege to be able to balance work life, family life and my community work. My choice has always been about "Is it important work in the community, is it work that's going to have an impact?" And then the secondary question is, "Am I going to get paid for it?" *Mm hm.* And of course, like all of us, I need to have enough of the "Am I going to get paid for it?" in order to meet my basic needs. *Yes.* And so, being involved in the community in areas where I feel like my skills, my perspective is adding value, *mm hm,* is really fun for me.

Interviewer: Would it be correct to say in contributing to society and in making Calgary a richer place, a better place to live, you're also making your own life richer, absolutely, and better and newcomers coming to Canada should embrace this opportunity?

Narmin: For me, it absolutely has worked. When I can be in the Calgary community and feel connected to different parts of this community, it's my place. This is my home, *yes,* this is my community and there's many parts of this community I can go to and feel like, yeah, this is my space. This is, and it's always a process, right? *Mm hm,* it's never going to be that place where you say it's perfect, there's absolutely nothing wrong with this community anymore and I can just sit in my rocking chair and zone out. I want to be able to sit in my rocking chair and look back and say that's the Calgary or the Canada that was, *mm hm,* this is the Calgary or the Canada that is, and I had even a small part to play in this journey.

Interviewer: Mm hm, and I think Calgary is a wonderful place to live because we have such diversity and so many people feel that way and contribute, absolutely, to the community.

Narmin: I truly believe that and I think the more we welcome people who bring different perspectives, the richer we are. And if I am able to continue to value my heritage, *mm hm,* my faith for what it is, I'm allowed to practice my faith in the way I can and I'm able to engage in the community, I think we've got a much richer place for all of us.

Interviewer: So, if you were to talk to someone who was new to Canada, starting out again, what kind of advice would you give them?

Narmin: Well, first, I don't like giving unsolicited advice. *If they asked you, what's one piece of advice that you would tell them?* Well, and that's because I think people have their own stories, they have their own histories, they have their own values. *Yes.* Based on my values, I would say, "Embrace Canada, Canada embraces you." I'm going to split the Canada in two parts. I'm going to say, "Canada embraces you and Canadians embrace you." So we've got Canada, which is the systems, the laws, the policies, welcomes newcomers. Canadians, beyond whatever the systems might do, and sometimes the systems don't always work for newcomers, but beyond that, Canadians are amazing people. So, trust them. The number of Canadians that have reached out to me over my time here, now it's been 45 years, so. *Well you are a Canadian and you are reaching out to others now.* Right, this is what Canada is, and so, to newcomers, accept that there are people who want to support you, *mm hm*, there's a system that wants to support you. That doesn't mean it's all easy, there's challenges along the way, absolutely. So, the one thing to me that's important is this is home. This is my new home. This is the home that I want to embrace, and so I need to be persistent when those challenges come my way, I need to be positive and I need to be engaged in creating my home. So, what's the environment, what's the community I want to live in, and then get engaged to do something about it.

Interviewer: Well, Narmin, thank you very much, my pleasure, *for sharing your story, for sharing your insights into*, absolutely my pleasure, *success in Canada, into making Calgary the place we want to live in.* Thank you. *Appreciate you being here.* Thank you.

Interviewer: Thank you for joining us for this conversation 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.