

Pathways to Belonging and Influence:

Strategies and skills of the flourishing Canadians, born abroad

"If you believe in something, don't give up until you've made it."

A conversation with Rita Kanchet

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.

Our guest for this conversation is Rita Khanchet. Rita is originally from Syria, and arrived in Calgary in December of 2015. She established a successful catering business called Syrian Cuisine Made with Love, and she's an active member of the Calgary community, helping others whenever she can. Welcome Rita, thank you for joining us today to share with us about your path to becoming a flourishing member of society in Canada.

Rita: Well thank you so much, it's my pleasure.

Interviewer: So Rita, your story is a little bit different than some of the others we've shared as you came to Canada as a refugee, rather than as an immigrant. You hadn't planned to come to Canada, but came out of necessity. Could you start off by telling us a little bit about why you came to Canada.

*Rita: It's all about your priority. Before the war, my priority was to have a new home, a new job, a new car. But when the war started, I think everything changed. So all what I want to keep my family and to save myself. That's why we decide to came to anyplace, any safe place. I still remember we went at 2013 to Lebanon. We registered at United Nation to, to go as a refugee and, *yes*, we applied an application to go anywhere, any safe place because we really want to save ourselves and our son. *So it was you and your husband and, my son, your son. And how old was your son?* He was just four. And when you think about what happened, you really want to escape because at war you have only two options, to hold a weapon and to be a killer, *mm hm*, or to be killed. There's no more options. So we prefer to escape and to, *yes*, be a refugee instead being killer or dead. *Yes*. So we registered at United Nations, *yes*, for refugee program and Canada accepted us. And we are lucky because if you will not accepted us, probably we'll stay behind the war and behind all these ugly things.*

Interviewer: So, in Syria, you worked as a broadcast engineer with the official Syrian TV, exactly, and your husband was a lawyer, but you had to start again doing something completely different when you arrived in Canada. How did you feel when you first arrived in Canada, in Calgary? What were some of the obstacles that you faced when you first arrived here?

Rita: Everything, starting from the weather, to the language, to everything, all the details, because as I told you we already came with a huge load over our shoulder and it's so difficult for you when you already came tired to adapt for the new country or society. So it took time for us just to take our breath again, *mm hm*, after we realized that now we are safe. *Mm hm*. Then we start to decide what we have to do. Really it's not easy because when you came here as a refugee it's something totally different from being an immigrant. When you be an immigrant, you have the decision, you have the choice. *Yes*. But when you are a refugee, you have to say only yes or no. *Mm hm*. This is the only two options to say yes or no. And we accepted to come to Canada, Canada opened her heart for us, and we thought it's so difficult at the beginning. Then, it takes time for us.

Interviewer: What is it about your experience or your attitude or your practices that helped you overcome the challenges when you first arrived and everything was difficult?

Rita: As I told you, it's all about your priority. When at 2012 when we lose our home and our office, we lost everything during one minute. We thought this is the end of the world. And we really feel sadness and we think that's it, we don't have anything else. Until I lost my father. He was a volunteer at Red Cross, *mm hm*, at Syria. And while he trying to save another people's life, another motor bomb come and kill him immediately. At that time we realized this is the real loss, the life. Not the house or the car or the office. From that time I discovered that we always have something else and we have to focus on what we have. I think I discovered that the life is the most important thing and while we are still alive, we still have the ability, the power to do anything we can imagine.

That's a wonderful attitude. Yeah, and my father, he gave me this example. If you believe in something you have to fight to the end. He fought to the end. And this give me this ideal example. If you believe in something, don't give up, *okay*, until you've made it.

Interviewer: So, here, you needed to find a way to support yourself and so you started a catering business, and I understand that you were the first Syrian refugee to get a business license in Calgary. So what made you decide to start a catering business?

Rita: I believe that food, it's like an international language, *mm hm*, just like art, just like laughing, just like music. You don't have to understand it, just try it and enjoy it. And I realized that you can cross the culture by food. *Yes*, and food always can gather people around tables. It makes you closer to another person when you share some food, something you prepared. So I decide, me and my husband, to open this small catering business.

Rita: Funny thing, we start a page on Facebook, *yes*, then there's a lot of people follow it, and one day the City of Calgary knocked at our door, and we were so afraid, because we didn't know how to make it legally. *Oh, okay, so you just started it* at home, and *okay*, we didn't know how to make it legal. And, so the first sentence that they told us "We are here to help you." And they gave us the steps to follow to make it legal, and we followed these steps and here we are now. We have everything we have. *Wonderful! What a great story!*

Interviewer: So were there people who influenced you, who trained you, who helped you establish yourselves when you first came to Canada?

Rita: These people starting from Syrian Refugee Support Group to Syrian Women's Club of Calgary, the Ukrainian Church, Father Efram, and Centre for Newcomers, and CRIEC, with Bruce, a lot of people. They helped us a lot because sometimes all what you need somebody to hold your hand and cross with you to the safer place. Sometimes it's not enough to tell you the instructions because it's not only about the rules, it's about the feeling. When you feel like somebody who really care about you, will feel now are you between safe's hands. Bruce, actually, with CRIEC, he helped us a lot, especially with my husband because he is a lawyer, *yes*, and that helped us a lot.

I want to share with you a story. At 2002, I represent Syria, my country, at Senegal for an international meeting for an organization called MIDAD, I still remember they took us on a journey to a very remote place, *okay*, called Lam Lam. At that time, I still remember that I sitting to take a rest, I was hold a piece of chocolate in my hand. Suddenly there's a child, around 5 years old, he came and grabbed this piece of chocolate from my hand and he ran away. Then he stopped and turned to me and smiled. At that time, I learned how to appreciate what I have. Because what you have sometimes, it's all what other people need, *mm hm*, or want, and for you it's nothing. To be honest, this piece of chocolate at that time, was nothing for me. *Yes*. But, it was a dream for this small hungry kid. So here I appreciate all the people who help me, because I know they give me back this piece of chocolate. And every time I meet people who really help me, I remember that smile from that small kid and I keep his face in my heart.

Interviewer: So, you've had many people in Canada help you out along the way, some who were from Canada, and some who maybe have arrived before you and they've helped you make those difficult steps, complete paperwork, or find your path. Would you recommend to newcomers to Canada to reach out and find a mentor or someone to help you along the way?

Rita: Exactly, and as I told you, there's always this piece of chocolate, and there's always a right hand to hold this piece of chocolate. And for us there's a lot of hands, to give it back to us, to help us. When you came as a refugee, some people put you in this frame, and you feel like you are stuck in this frame, for long, long way and sometimes you ask yourself, "Am I still a human being by being a refugee?" And sometimes you ask yourself, "Why they call me a refugee? It's not a good word." *Mm hm*, But when you try to love yourself, to accept yourself, to appreciate what you have, you will not even care about the titles. And for me, I only care about who I am, and who I meet, *uh huh*, how can we make this city best place to live?

Interviewer: You want to make Calgary the best place to live, and when you arrived in Calgary, although you received help from people, you immediately looked for ways to help others. You organized Syrian refugees to help people after the fires in Fort MacMurray, you organized members of your community to prepare a meal for homeless members of the Calgary community last Christmas. You've connected with the Calgary Police Service to build bridges between the police service and members of the Syrian community, and also, in your business, you've hired women to help you so they can become more financially independent. So, you've really given back to the Calgary community as you are getting settled here. How does being active in the Calgary community, um, help you integrate into society?

Rita: I still remember that when we first lined up at the refugee camp at Lebanon. At that time, they considered us as a number, or as just a file in the United Nation files. We lined up for like four hours under the sun, the very hard sun, and when we arrived to the office, they gave us a number. Three of us, we became just a number, me, my husband, my son, became a number. "Go and wait until we invite you or we call your number." And something so hurt my soul, because after all what we passed in the war, there is still people, they didn't appreciate being human, *mm hm*, they didn't notice that we're still human, we are not numbers, we are not titles, we are nothing unless we are just human. *Mm hm*. When we came to Calgary I learned from Calgarian people the acceptance, how to accept all people.

I will share with you a story. It was maybe the second week, while trying to go to Columbia College we take the bus number 51 and there is a woman driver. She saw us that everyday we came with this bus. After three days, she stopped us while we tried to come and she told to us, tomorrow, I need to talk with you while you're in the bus. And when we came back to see her the next day, guess what? She gave us three warm hats. She made it by herself because it's not warm enough to go outside without this on. Can you imagine that? *Wow!* And she didn't even know us, but she noticed that we are foreign, we came from another country and we didn't know how to adapt to the cold weather. *Wow!* She made three hats for me, for my son and for my husband. So how can I stop, not do anything for these kind people? You gave us a lot, and any chance to give back to Canada, to Calgary, absolutely, I will do something. I don't mean it's the perfect city, we still have some people didn't accept the Syrian refugees, but that's nothing comparing with the total people. So this is my chance to say thank you to this beautiful lady. She spent all the time to make these hats for us.

Interviewer: What do you think is your greatest strength? Coming here, starting a business, starting over again, what has helped you get through the bumps along the way?

Rita: I think the first thing, my father's example. If you believe something, you have to fight and not give up. Don't ever, never give up. And if you think this door was closed, try to find another door, another window, try to find solution, look around yourself. Some people they stuck in this point, and didn't look around themselves. Look around yourself, definitely you will find a solution. Don't give up. This is my message. And this is, I think what keep me strong.

Interviewer: Was there a point when you said, I belong here, Calgary is my home?

Rita: When you share something with people, when they ask me why are you going to help these Fort MacMurrrian people? Because I answered them, They lost everything while a minute and we lost everything while a minute, so nobody all over the world can understand them like us. *Right*. When you share the same experience with people, when you find the love in their eyes, when you touch the care with your hands, so you feel that you will start to belong to this place. I really find this acceptance, this care from people, so yes, this is home. I mean, I don't have the real feeling that it's my home, but I start to feel like this. *Okay, great*. Maybe it takes time? But I really appreciate Calgary and love it.

Interviewer: That's wonderful, and you are just part way on your journey, yeah, right? You've only been here for a short time. Two years, and you've settled, you started your own business, you're studying to start a new career here. Yes, What would you say to somebody else who's coming here and they have to establish their lives and start again?

Rita: The first thing, don't give up, really, and there's always something new, you can find it. As I told you when we lost everything, we thought it's the end of the world. But then we discovered, no, we still have a lot of things to do, a lot of things to have. We can achieve a lot of things when we believe in ourselves, when we believe in our family and when we believe in our abilities. So each person has a certain strength point. Focus on it and you will definitely achieve your dream.

Interviewer: Wonderful, Rita thank you very much for sharing your story, your positivity, your strategies to succeed in Canada and to make it your home, we really appreciate you coming in and we wish you success in your life in Canada.

Rita: Thank you so much, it's my pleasure really.

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.