

Making newcomers feel welcome

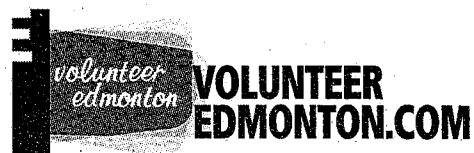
Every volunteer is special

Understanding cultural differences was a topic for discussion at the six-series Supporting Newcomers to the Workplace workshops.

Hosted by Volunteer Edmonton, the workshop curriculum developed by the U of A's Faculty of Extension with the support of Jewish Family Services, helps nonprofit employees and volunteer managers understand the complexities around recruiting and supporting immigrants as volunteers. Immigrants face a number of challenges that may prevent them from becoming volunteers – language, isolation, loneliness, lack of access to resources, differing cultural norms and financial difficulties.

"Immigrants want to become integrated in their new home country. As organizations we don't want to do anything that might exclude them as volunteers," says Janice Bell, director of Volunteer Edmonton. "Their enthusiasm, knowledge and skills make them great candidates for nonprofits desperately seeking volunteers. Volunteering is also an excellent way for newcomers to become more engaged in Canadian society."

One of the workshop sessions focused specifically on identity and cultural differences. This session was designed to teach participants about cultural awareness and how to handle



issues that arise in the workplace. Zenobia Jamal, workshop facilitator and principle of Zenev Educational Consultants, opened the discussion by asking participants to list characteristics that make up their identity. Some members noted age, race, gender, educational background and hometown. "It's important to understand our own identity as a way to understand other identities encountered in the workplace," Jamal said, adding that while it can be easy to assume based on exterior characteristics like age or gender, other characteristics that make up a person's identity are not as easily distinguishable.

The exercise highlighted the differences and similarities existing in the room, and how they can lead to misleading assumptions, stereotypes, feelings of discomfort or anxiety, and cultural biases.

"If we want to make a welcoming environment for all people, we should be finding ways to address and understand different identities," said Natasha Goudar, workshop facilitator and former labour educator.

Both Goudar and Jamal challenged the group to think of ways that their organization could become more inclusive.

One participant mentioned that her agency strives to be inclusive by celebrating a variety of cultural holidays. "We have people with different backgrounds. It's nice to recognize differences and make everyone feel like they're part of the organization rather than have them feel excluded because they don't celebrate a certain holiday."

The workshop continues over the remaining two weeks, with the last session happening on Friday. The Supporting Newcomers to Canada in the Workplace series will be offered again in 2009. Companies who wish to find out more about how to welcome newcomers to their workplaces as employees can visit www.extension.ualberta.ca and search "cultural diversity", or call (780) 492-3116 or (780) 492-3109 for more information. To learn more about volunteering, visit our website at www.volunteeredmonton.com.

For more information or suggestions for story ideas, please contact Evelyn Pham, communications co-ordinator, at epham@volunteeredmonton.com, call 732-6655 or check out our website at www.volunteeredmonton.com

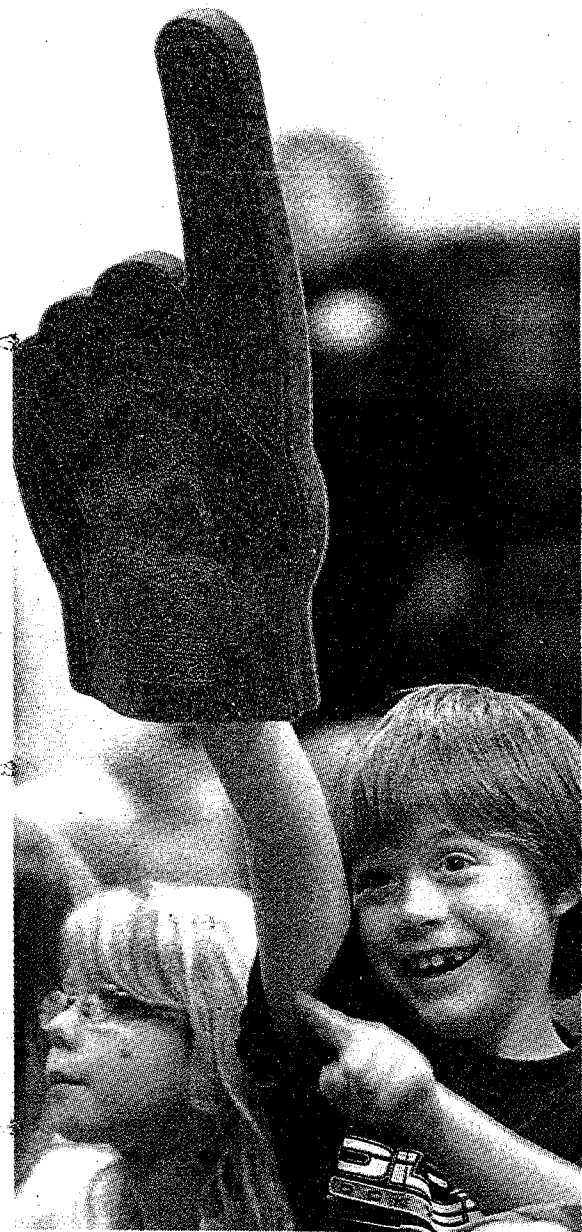


PHOTO BY KEN ARMSTRONG

WE'RE NO. 1: A Holy Cross students cheers during the launch of the Edmonton Oilers Community Foundation Adopt-A-School Project last week.