

# Take a Walk in My Shoes: Immigrant Experiences to Secure Professional Employment



Text © 2022 Marina Morgenshtern, Trent University Durham-GTA; and Dalon Taylor, Trent University Durham-GTA

Photographs © Participants

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# About the Project

In recent years, the federal, provincial, and municipal governments have made concerted efforts to attract and retain newcomers. In 2016, immigrants in Durham Region comprised 24% (153,930 people) of the population and this rate has continued to grow. The Regional Municipality of Durham operates the Diversity and Immigration (D&I) Program to assist in the coordination of services; embed the needs of newcomers in services and in the community; and to accelerate the settlement outcomes of newcomers in the Region.

Professional employment is a key factor in the integration of immigrants. For this project, a university-community partnership has been created to better understand local immigrant experiences of securing professional employment; to inform the D&I Program work identifying employment gaps and best practices for services and employers; and to increase awareness of immigrant experiences in the Region.

In the summer of 2021, we gathered a small group of new immigrants living in the Durham region, provided them with digital cameras, and asked them to take photographs that illustrated their experience of securing professional employment—the challenges, the opportunities, and the solutions—through their own images and words. Our hope was not only to describe their experiences but also collectively develop recommendations for social change from immigrants' point of view. By combining the power of photography with immigrants' stories we hoped to generate evocative understanding of the immigrants' meaning-making about their experiences of securing professional employment, and raise awareness in the community and among policy makers to promote systemic change. We intentionally chose Photovoice methodology for this project as it facilitates inclusion of marginalized groups in critical dialogue regarding pressing social issues related to their experiences from their perspectives.

As we worked with the participants, we learned about multiple challenges involved in securing professional employment. They told us about being lost trying to devise successful employment strategies, find meaningful learning opportunities, create strong networks, and address bureaucratic demands. They shared with us the pain of uncertainty and disappointments, often feeling rejected, judged, or exploited, their professional experiences and credentials being questioned, unrecognized and/or devalued. But we also learned about their immense strengths navigating these challenges and finding belonging through positive and hopeful outlook, perseverance, family and friends support, flexibility, courage, and hard work.

The collective story of immigrants securing professional employment is a story of making do, persevering, going above and beyond, looking out for one another, staying confident in one's skills and abilities and staying hopeful and positive no matter what. But it is also a story of acceptance, support, recognition, and validation by the broader community. The urgency to change social climate to include immigrant experience in decision making about services, policy development and local culture became very clear as we worked throughout the project. The story of immigrants securing professional employment is never individual or limited to job search or professional skills. This story is also social and systemic; solutions require the participation of the entire society.

# PARTICIPANTS



Most participants were between the ages of 35-40.

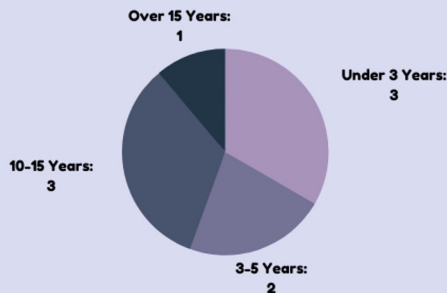


The study's participants consisted of 8 women and 1 man

The study's participants immigrated from these 7 countries



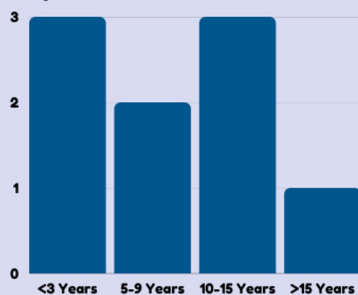
How long the participants have lived in Canada



Participants of the study have a total of 9 degrees/diplomas



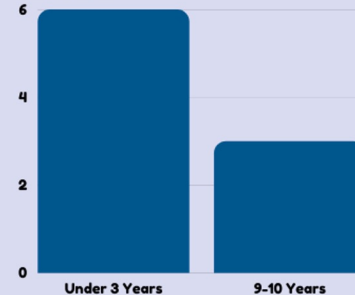
Pre-migration Professional Experience



Occupations

C-Suite Executive; Human Resources Specialist; Physical Therapist; Dietitian; Aviation Supervisor; Business Consultant; Registered Nurse

Employment Search in Canada

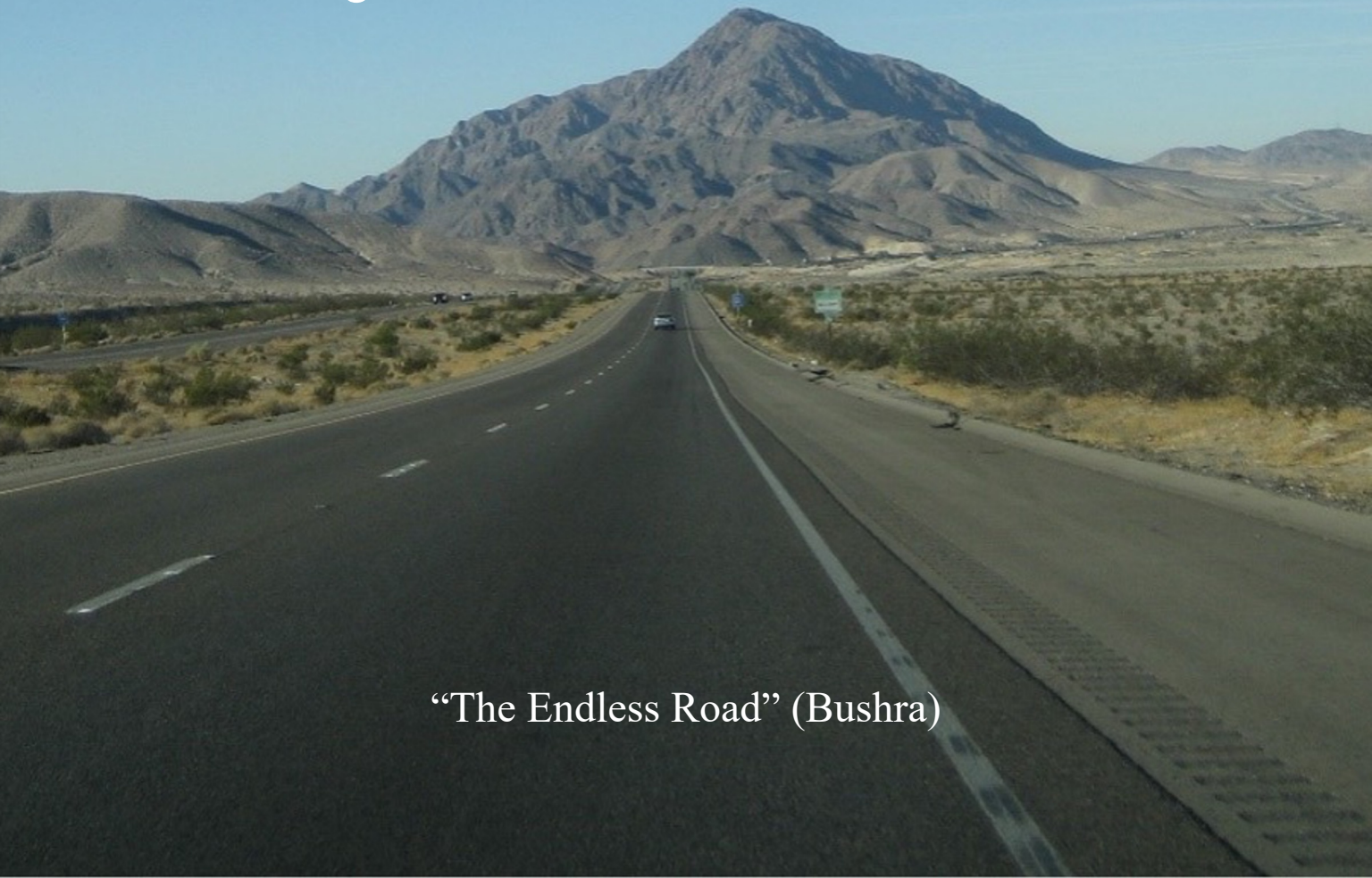


Pathways to Employment

Employment help services, career services, student job board, LinkedIn, employment consultations, placement agencies, personal referrals, and online job sites.

## Thank you

**Bushra, FLS, Julie, Ruth, Nitasha Gupta, Vilma A., Cynthia Tellez, Anonymous and Michelle** for the courage to participate in this important research. Thank you for allowing us to be part of your vulnerabilities and intimate stories. Thank you for speaking about the challenges, the solutions, and experiences as you were looking for professional employment as an internationally trained professional. Your contributions are valuable to hear about and learn from. It is crucial that immigrants are part of the table where conversations are taking place about them, and that immigrant voices and ideas are listened to and become part of action plans to inform social change.



“The Endless Road” (Bushra)



## The Journey

### **FINDINGS**

Participants' narrative about their experiences securing professional employment starts with high hopes regarding their labor market integration as they arrive to Canada. This narrative continues throughout the description of the pathways to employment, encounters, and coping strategies. It concludes with the hope that Canada will recognize their professional credentials and experiences, so that one day they secure the professional status that they expected when they chose to immigrate to Canada.

# COLLECTION OF PHOTOS

## **The Arrival**

My Canadian Dream

Comfort Label

It's Going to Be A Long Hilly Ride!

Big Unknown

## **Pathways To Employment**

A Glimpse into the Future

You Are There, Yet You Are Not

Lake Moraine, Beautiful Nonetheless

Survival of the Fittest

## **Opportunities & Challenges**

The Okanagan Valley

Darkness

The Shoe That Matters

Broken Rules

A Nightmare

The Other Side

Prejudice

## **Facing New Realities**

Letting Go

Swim, Don't Sink

Burning My Ship

Give And Believe

Unearthed Rooted Beauty

Songbird

Canadian Library: More Than a Library

## **Rays Of Hope**

The Reflection

Invisible Light

The Glacier

Another View of Lake Louise

There is Light

Enhanced Path

West African Groceries

Life is Beautiful when Peaceful

# THE ARRIVAL

The participants arrive to Canada with high hopes to attain their professional careers. After all, they believe, their permanent residence in Canada was granted based on their educational and professional credentials. However, they soon find themselves stripped of their professional privilege as their credentials are not recognized or are devalued.



“The Grass on the Other Side Ain’t that Green!” (Anonymous)





I was of the belief that Canada was a land full of opportunities, welcoming, inclusive, and where professionals with extensive experience and recognized qualifications were welcomed and appreciated. A country where diversity and inclusion is a hallmark of its existence. After my first two years as a permanent resident in Canada, sadly, I no longer share this thinking, as the reality of the challenges faced by immigrants in their attempt to be gainfully employed eroded my prior beliefs.

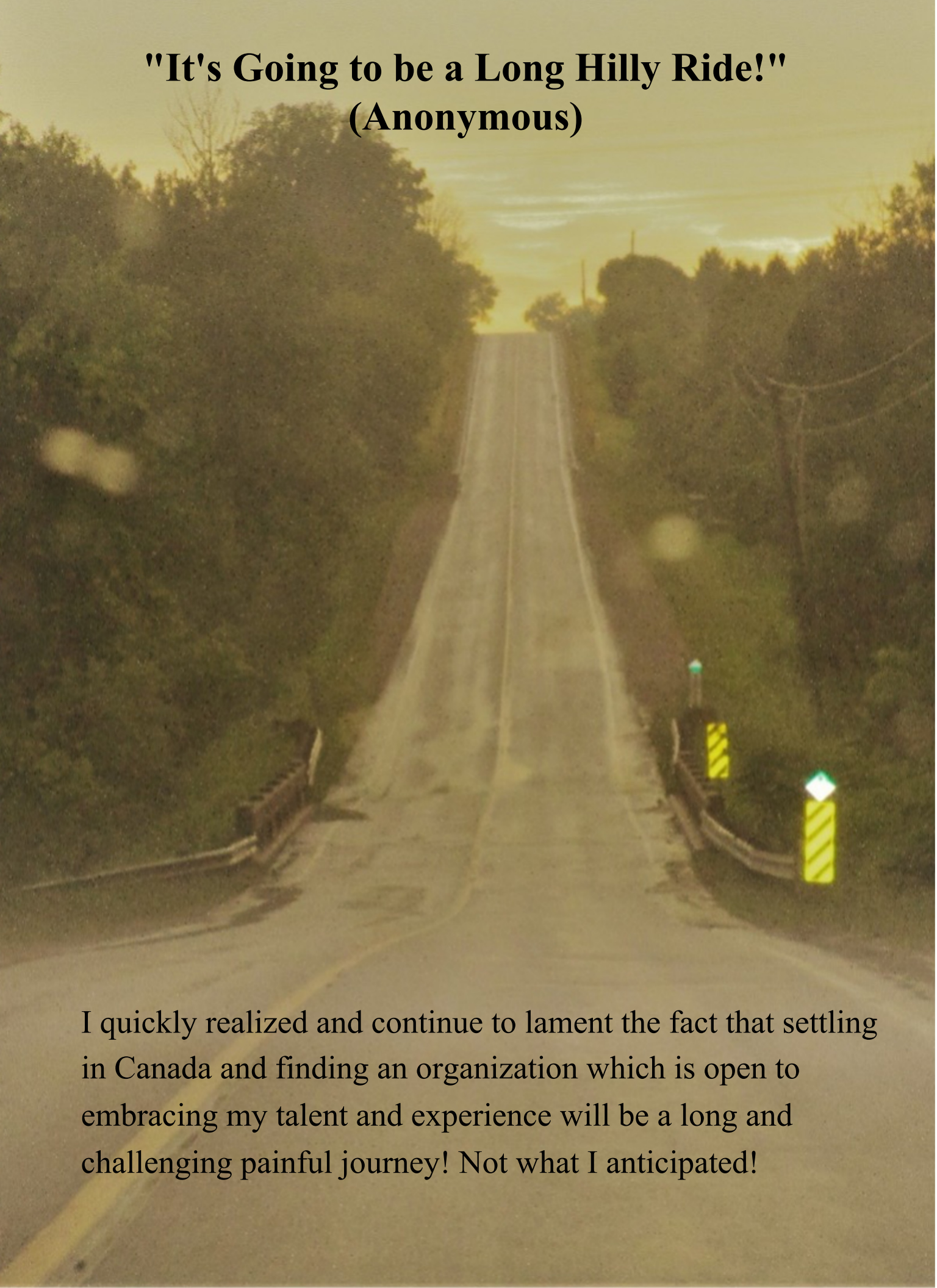
**“My Canadian Dream” (Anonymous)**

## “Comfort Label” (FLS)

I feel like red wine inside that bottle. Wine that has complex flavor. From where I came from, I was infused with training, skills and experience - and I felt well-seasoned. I thought I was half-full. Ready to offer what I have. But then, employers have viewed me as half-empty. Not bearing the “made in Canada” label, not bearing any Canadian exposure. I needed to be reprocessed and go through quality control despite the richness of my experience.



**"It's Going to be a Long Hilly Ride!"  
(Anonymous)**

A photograph of a long, straight road stretching into the distance, flanked by trees and utility poles. The road is paved and has a yellow and black striped marker on the right side. The sky is a pale, hazy yellow, suggesting a sunrise or sunset. The overall tone is somewhat somber and reflective.

I quickly realized and continue to lament the fact that settling in Canada and finding an organization which is open to embracing my talent and experience will be a long and challenging painful journey! Not what I anticipated!

## "Big Unknown" ( Vilma A.)



The horse can relate to me, in a new country, a new adventure. I am very small like the rocking horse on the ground in a big country surrounded by the asphalt of this new place.

# PATHWAYS TO EMPLOYMENT

Here the participants describe the initial stages of their employment search. They are equipped with the knowledge of effective job search strategies—being optimistic and enthusiastic; networking; crafting resumes; yielding every opportunity; or aiming to stand out and get noticed amidst tens of applicants.



“...when I really see around me, I have support and there is a helping hand” (Vilma A.)



## **“A Glimpse into the Future” (Ruth)**

I came to this spot often to look at players’ determination to excel while also playing with enthusiasm. I realized that I should choose a career that will be needful for solving problems if I was determined enough without sacrificing my enthusiasm.

# **“You Are There But Yet You Are Not”**

## **(Michelle)**

It relates to my experience, because in the picture, the gate to the tennis court is open, which means I can enter the court. At the same time, I do not have equipment (tennis racket or a ball, etc.) or another player to play along with. The same way, professionals in various fields are able to get a visa to enter Canada on the basis of their professional abilities, only to find out that they may not be able to pursue the profession as their documents alone do not state exactly what the professional bodies are looking for.



## **“Lake Moraine, Beautiful Nonetheless” (Julie)**

With luck, this photo could have had the “burning mountains”, clear skies, as the sun slowly appears and the incredible Rocky Mountains reflect on the still, calm turquoise lake. Instead, that day, the clouds decided to stay, there was haze due to wildfires nearby, no sun, and I could barely see the Rocky Mountains. The experience was still magical, nonetheless. No regrets! My career started the same way in a sense. I did everything by the book – “craft your resume, be honest in job interviews, submit your resume in every job opportunity you see”, etc. Others who had equal credentials as me got better pay and better job opportunities. I still got in the field of sales, but with less compensation.







## **“Survival of the Fittest” (Nitasha Gupta)**

The differences between the types of birds - geese, ducks and swans - one has to stand out and raise their head like the swan in the middle to make a mark to get that one job that 20 other people applied for.

# OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

As the search for employment continues, the opportunities that participants have – skill development programs, internships, networking—are permeated with challenges. The participants share a broad range of experiences from inadequate mentorship to judgement, to lack of recognition, to exploitation and deceit, to prejudice, to devaluation, to rejection.



Did you know that Canada has a desert? I did not, until I got there! When I started my journey, there were many things I did not know about. Information that could have made my career stride faster (Julie)

## The Okanagan Valley (Julie)

The Okanagan is known for its long, hot summers with dry, arid conditions and winters are fairly mild. These are some of the factors that contribute to the best climates for growing grapes. Sometimes, we plant the seeds in the wrong soil and wrong environment. I feel like I have somehow done the same in my journey...I feel like mentoring would have benefited me in many ways. Having someone who could guide me in my career decisions and options could have gone a long way.



## **“Darkness” (Cynthia Tellez)**

I attended [a presentation about co-op program] and I was told that I will be supervised and trained by a professional in my field in the company. It was a great opportunity to learn about our career in Canada. Also, the company may offer you a job at the end of the placement... I asked the speaker if there were any accommodations or childcare for participants because I had a two-year-old son. He answered me: “Who would have a baby before coming to Canada! You will have to pay for your childcare if you want to be part of this program.” I didn't apply and got depressed.





## **“The Shoe that Matters” (FLS)**

White is my favorite color. It is when I put them on that I feel I’m at my best. But you see, my white shoes appear untouched. Unworn. Unused. That is exactly where I am at this point. The best of my skills and training is yet to be used. I have worn out my other pair of shoes and white pair is waiting for its season.



**"Broken Rules"**  
**(Cynthia Tellez)**

I decided to participate in a program designed to provide some soft skills and field experience for newcomers. After the classes were finished, it was time to be matched with an institution. I had 3 institutions interested in my profile and I chose one of them because I was interviewed by the director and she wrote a compelling mail to the coordinator stating the importance of the mission of her institution, as well as how she helped all her interns find jobs within her institution or allies. My internship was productive and in only 7 weeks I put some processes in place, created a database and won funding for her institution. She always praised my work. Once the internship was about to finish, I realized the sad truth. She used to say the same compelling words everywhere she could get free labor. Once the internships finished, she just looked for more workers. At the end she presented all the work as her achievements. It was especially disappointing because the grant I won for her required a coordinator for 3 months. I really thought she would offer me that position.



## “A Nightmare” (Anonymous)

My job search journey has not worked out how I hoped it would. Many closed doors, many broken dreams underpinned by hypocrisy and a closed mindset. Although I am currently employed, I am underemployed, my skills are not embraced and my attempts to explore new opportunities are met with rejection.





## “The Other Side” (Bushra)

I knocked on many doors during my search for employment, including employment agencies, recruiters, connecting with decision makers on LinkedIn, and while some of them did not even bother responding, some chose to respond only to ghost me later. So, while some may have ‘opened the door’ for me, it only led to a brick wall at the other end.



## **“Prejudice” (Cynthia Tellez)**

This photo shows the difference between my physical appearance and my son’s. I took my son for a walk. We were laughing and being playful. I was singing to him in Spanish. A neighbour approached me. “He seems very happy...You are teaching him your language. He likes it!...You are doing a great job!...I would like the nanny of my grandkids to be as dedicated as you are. How much do the [last name] pay you?”...

Unless the institutions around the immigration and settlement process change their message and stop perpetuating cheap or free labor, Canadians will keep looking to immigrants like second class people that are only suitable for the jobs they don't want.

# FACING NEW REALITIES

The participants learn that even though they have the skills and credentials, use available resources, and follow effective job search strategies, these do not suffice. Despite the barriers experienced, they survive the pain of systemic injustice and continue moving forward. Some take up survival jobs while waiting years for their credentials to be recognized. Others reinvent themselves professionally and become entrepreneurs. They have no choice but to focus on their strengths and are determined to make the most of their life in Canada.



**I survived through many seasons to bloom out a victorious  
in finding a job which will support me and my family  
(Nitasha Gupta)**

## "Letting Go" (Vilma A.)

I decided to take this picture with my arms open wide and my hands out because I had to take risks in this new country.

Going on the swing without holding the chains can be dangerous—you can fall.

You can start with no knowledge and no experience, but with some effort applied over time, you can get higher in your field and become an expert. I am a risk taker and since I arrived in Canada, I have been taking risks, many opportunities have come, and I decided to let the fear go away.





## “Swim, Don’t Sink” (FLS)

I must adapt. I must respond quickly to the change of circumstances, just like the Amphibus modifications must be made. So, either I must swim in the water, or sink in the bottom, or to turn around to go back to where I came from. And I have people loaded on me that expected me to stay afloat. Just like the Amphibus, I tackled the water and stayed on the surface.

# **“Burning My Ship!” (Cynthia Tellez)**



My conversation with a settlement worker:

- Hello, I studied engineering in my country. I would like to know how I can assess my degree to work in my field.

- Well, all the regulated professions have an organization in charge of licensing professionals in that field. The process is overwhelmingly complicated and long to discourage applicants. It is possible but takes a long time. You would have to pass exams or take courses in university, prove your experience and fill tons of documentation. Very few of our engineer clients pass through the process successfully.

- So, what do they do if they can't work in their field?

- Sooner or later, they work in their field but not as engineers... Right now, why we don't start by finding you a survival job. Next month we will have an opening for forty people to work in a warehouse.

Months later, I realized that he was completely right about the licensing process and the regulating organizations, so I decided to burn my degree and start from scratch in a field I like.

When I decided I would become an entrepreneur in Canada, I went back to my country and talked to my ex-clients and friends. After ten meetings, I realized the good impression I made on those CEOs. Most of them would partner with me. All of them remembered me giving more than I was supposed to. They remembered me helping them in different ways before and after they were my clients. They trusted me. I decided to invest in EdTech. Both the mission and business model made sense. It was the best decision I could make. I applied to the most renowned sector specific acceleration program in Canada as the new CEO of a company already present in 5 countries of Latin America that wanted to come to Canada. I was admitted. The classes, the experts, the mentors and the VCs involved were the elite in the industry. The entrepreneurship programs that are offered to newcomers were a joke in comparison. I got to see what the “Canadians’ world” looks like. I learned a lot about business but most importantly I understood that I could get what I wanted in Canada.





**“Give and Believe” (Cynthia Tellez)**



## **“Unearthed Rooted Beauty” (Nitasha Gupta)**

Roots. This is a photo of a tree unearthed from its roots. This photo reflects how I sometimes felt when I left India: being unearthed or taken out from my roots. It shows how even though unearthed, there is pure beauty in how it is, and it will continue to be a home for many, just as I left and made my unearthed roots home in Canada.

## “Songbird” (Nitasha Gupta)

The loner bird who is lost after leaving its nest is what I felt after leaving India. I reflect on all the struggles that the bird has to go through when it moves away in finding a new home, food and livelihood in a new environment...It reminded me of the time when I moved to Canada and had to look for a job and home to be on my feet to thrive. This made me think of the struggles that I went through on my own and singing through it all to make the most of it.



# “Canadian Library: More than a Library”

(Ruth)

Reading books, novels and media publications became second nature for me as a new immigrant in Canada. I wanted to read everything available to understand my new home and society.



# RAYS OF HOPE

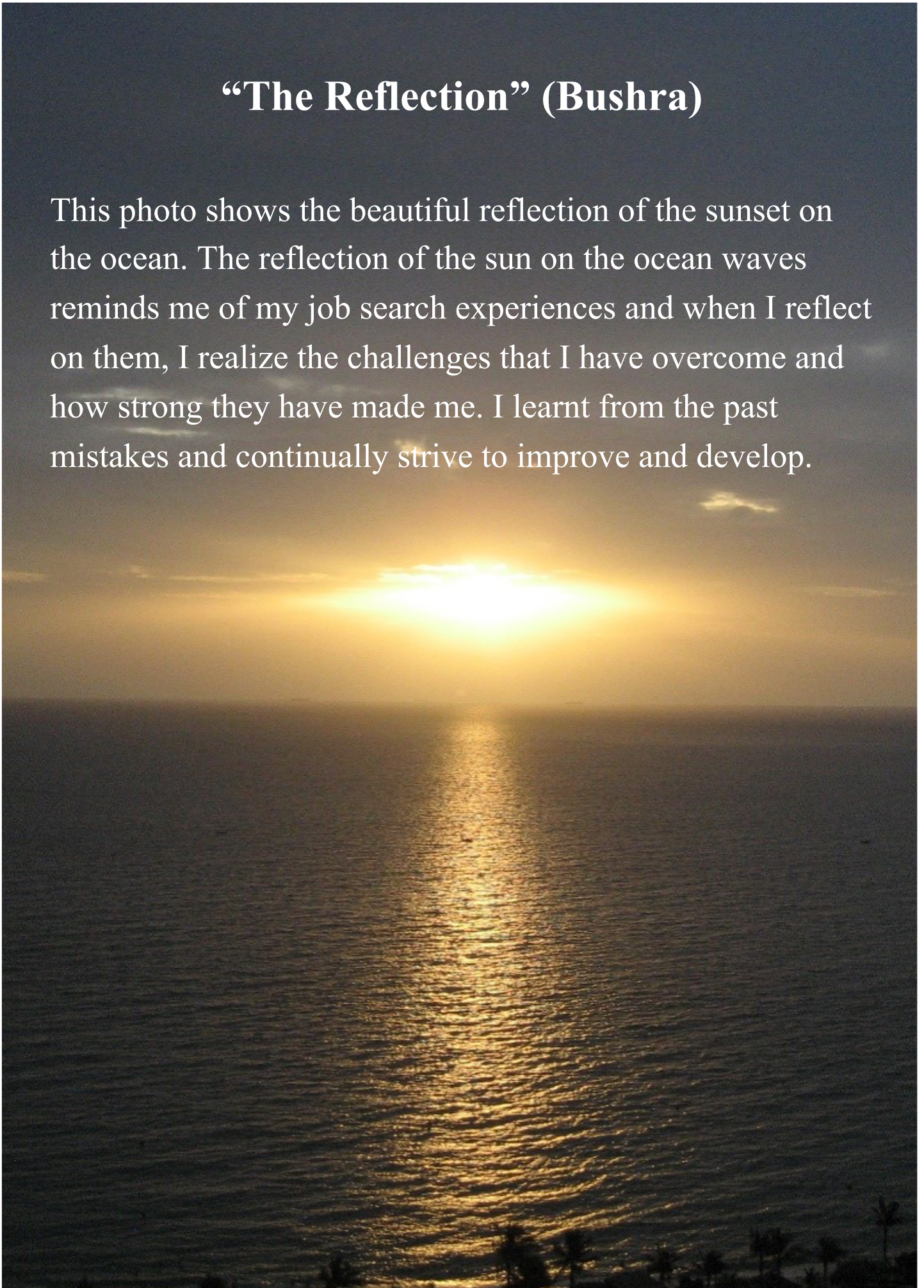
There are struggles and there is also optimism. Optimism that is grounded in reflection and realization of some success weathering challenges, and in hopes that one day Canada will take proactive steps to recognize immigrants' challenges and to find ways to treat everyone equitably, immigrants and Canadian-born.



The wishbone symbolizes the good wishes, and the hope my family had when I left my home country. The tree symbolizes me, my fears, and the underdog Latina whose first language is Spanish and who just wants to break through. The tree represents me, holding my wishes and goals in the unknown journey ahead of me (Vilma A.).

## **“The Reflection” (Bushra)**

This photo shows the beautiful reflection of the sunset on the ocean. The reflection of the sun on the ocean waves reminds me of my job search experiences and when I reflect on them, I realize the challenges that I have overcome and how strong they have made me. I learnt from the past mistakes and continually strive to improve and develop.





## “Invisible Light” (Vilma A.)

This picture focuses on the lantern and the flame which is off because of the storm is coming. It is important because holding a lantern means that I will take the initiative. It doesn't matter if the flame is off, I will overcome the failures. The tattoo of the lioness means to me: “Be strong even in the harsh moments”. I wanted to hold the lantern this way instead of carrying because I really wanted a picture that shows victory even in the adversity.

## **“The Glacier” (Julie)**

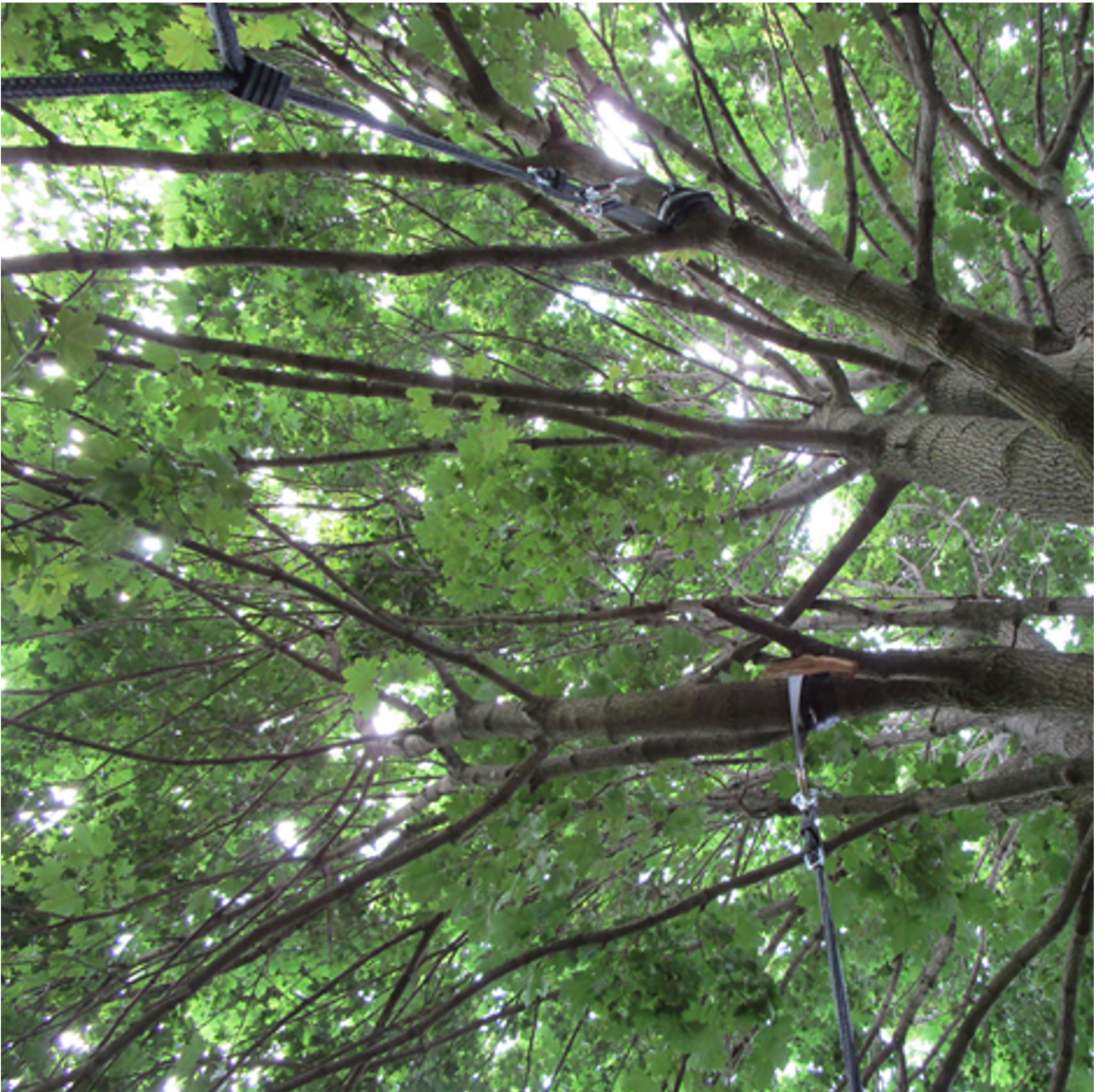
We went up to the glacier. It was exciting but also, it was scary going up. Lots of things could easily go wrong. Just like my journey, going up was exciting and scary. When you get to the top, it feels amazing!





## “Another View of Lake Louise” (Julie)

Just like many of us, it took hard work and perseverance for me to get to where I am now. In this photo, the view was gorgeous -- well-worth the hike!



In my experience you have to possess relentless perseverance to overcome the challenges and to be able to see the light past the branches and know that giving up is not an option.

**“There is Light” ( Michelle)**

## “Enhanced Path” (FLS)

While under construction, to be well-built for the job, I’ve hit a few intersections. I had to decide to make a turn or to take other roads that don’t require fixing the skills and capabilities that I already have. I did take those few turns and gained a few life-enriching experience that enable me to see better perspective in life.





## **“West African Groceries” (Ruth)**

This relates with my experience regarding having compassion on myself in a new environment far away. Being able to find African foodstuff gave me a sense of happiness, wellness, and thankfulness.

# **Life is Beautiful When Peaceful (Ruth)**



There is space for everyone in life. The world is big enough to take all races and all people, we only must live amicably with one another and stop the human construct of inequality and hate.

# Social Action and Policy Change

Instead of calling those who have survived the pain of systemic injustice “resilient,” we invite you to search for solutions to the challenges that no one should need the resilience to survive. With hope that Canada will act, the participants offered ideas for needed responses that benefit everyone, not just immigrants:

- Raise awareness about immigrant experiences of deskilling that force them into ‘survival’ jobs.
- Remove emphasis on ‘Canadian experience’ and focus on ‘relevant skills’ instead.
- Challenge ‘start from the bottom’ approach to immigrant integration.
- Dispel myths, misunderstandings, and misconceptions in public perception about immigrants.
- Affirm the value immigrants bring to Canada.
- Provide training to human resources personnel, recruiters and employers on anti-racism, cultural humility, and immigrant experience.
- Continue to create open forums for conversations between immigrants and policy makers, politicians, and local social services administration and staff.
- Involve new immigrants in decision-making regarding policy changes and service provision.
- Organize industry specific information and make it readily available to new immigrants.

# Your Reflections, Our Reader

This photobook marks the beginning of a journey of reflection, learning, sharing and action. We hope that these stories and photos have enriched your perspective about the challenges and triumphs that immigrant professionals have faced and continue to face in Canada. It may have even inspired you, as it has inspired all of us involved in the project.

Please take a moment to reflect on what you have read and seen...

- What struck you the most about this photobook?
- What feelings or memories did it evoke?
- What issues do you think need to be prioritized?
- How do the stories you have read relate to what you do?  
What would you like to follow up on?

We will appreciate your comments, suggestions and ideas submitted to

[https://trentu.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV\\_etauWXBxzOdY3tA](https://trentu.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_etauWXBxzOdY3tA)

OR



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