



Something to celebrate

It hasn't always been easy, but IRCOM's story is an uplifting one

By Rachel Derksen

If you like a comeback story, then you'll love the tale of IRCOM.

Born in a blaze of excitement and high expectations, the Immigrant and Refugee Community Organization of Manitoba was laid low by tough times and might have disappeared altogether. But today, the excitement is back and the IRCOM model is increasingly hailed as a powerful new way to help newcomers settle.



MAGIC MOMENTS: Aisha Mustafa and Mona Haroon enjoy IRCOM's summer celebration last year. Join us on June 26 for our 20th anniversary and an Immigration Celebration at Central Park.

IRCOM House officially opened its doors on January 4, 1991. The organization got its start a few years earlier as the South-East Asia Refugee Community of Manitoba (SEARCOM). The name change represented an expanding focus on refugees from around the globe and new objectives, specifically providing transitional housing for newcomers to Winnipeg. Initially, tenants were able to stay for approximately a year's time, and programming was focused on sports and recreation. Those programs operated out of four separate inner-city sites and were run by only two staff members.

IRCOM continues to provide affordable transitional housing but the ways in which it assists newcomers have grown and changed over the years. From the start, the organization has looked to an empowerment approach for its programming – a hand-up rather than a hand-out attitude. Over the course of the first few years, it became apparent that an important part of that approach was establishing a sense of trust between staff and tenants.

The organization's scope grew, too – IRCOM's period of residency increased to three years, and Sports and Recreation (now the After School Program) has since been joined by an array of additional programming. In developing new programs, the focus is on the often unique needs of newcomers. That means filling gaps in programming offered by other agencies and not duplicating programs available elsewhere. By 1995, IRCOM had formed a Tenant Association, and was already looking to expand its English as an Additional Language program (called the Newcomer Literacy Initiative). Other new programs came to include the Community Resource Program (which fosters life-skills and capacity-building for tenants), the Newcomer Greening Initiative (including IRCOM House's renowned balcony gardens), and the Volunteer Program.

But the process of getting IRCOM House up and running was not easy. IRCOM's adolescent years were tumultuous, featuring confrontation, negotiation, and a huge amount of learning.

Funding, in particular, was problematic. The mid-to-late '90s saw significant cuts to federal funding and a recession – with a resulting drop in funding. It was a time of struggle – for tenants, staff and the board of directors. Programs were limited and underfunded, while the physical building was aging and in increasingly poor shape.

The building was handed over to Manitoba Housing, which allowed IRCOM House to remain in operation, but it was not a joyous time.

"It was a very tough place to be," says Tony Kavanagh, a current board member. "There was a cockroach infestation, youth were drafted into local street gangs, refugees had little on-site assistance, and problems naturally resulted."

As late as 1998, there was still a great deal of frustration that IRCOM's initial goals were not being effectively met. In addition to early financial missteps, ongoing challenges included staff turnover and the lack of a clear, supported vision for the future.

IRCOM's time as a troubled youth did not last forever. Engagement with these difficulties has led to something of a renaissance within the last few years.

Fresh perspectives, firmer financial footing, and new expertise were all key to this change. In September 2005, Lindsay Ward joined the board and found himself elected president at just his second meeting. Ward, with a background in real estate, was joined a few months later by Robert Katrynuik, a general contractor who helped to lead a suite-by-suite renovation battle – at a time when obtaining funding approval to replace a broken stove could take many months. Kavanagh joined a month later and the rebirth of the board was underway. (It now has 10 directors, all with strong professional credentials and expertise in a wide range of areas).

Struggle turns to triumph

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But the re-birth of IRCOM also took place at ground level, and was led by a dynamo from St. Vital named Noëlle DePape. With a background in peacebuilding and conflict resolution in places such as Bénin, the Balkans, and Lebanon, DePape brought energy, passion and a commitment to team-building that sparked a transformation of the agency.

The difference that DePape and her staff made was striking: Kids stayed away from gangs, tenants were better accommodated, and a community was solidified. The organization benefited from this new sense of purpose and passion, and through it so did Manitoba.

Kavanagh compares IRCOM's years of struggle and lack of hope to a sad frog saved by the magic of collaboration.

"A perfectly unique and atypical human mix of vision and hard work," he says. "Now IRCOM is a prince, kissed by potential and hope."

Clearly the heart of IRCOM's success is found in its people: Partnership between the organization and the greater Winnipeg community, enthusiastic involvement and leadership within IRCOM's own community, and the growth of positive networks.

And of course the tenants, who both inspire and are inspired. The goal is for them to become more than just tenants – to be full participants in their new homeland. To be comfortable and happy here. To be Canadians.

IRCOM's more recent struggles have less to do with frustrated potential and more to do with where to find the space and resources to accommodate the expansion. Part of the space question has recently been answered by the new exciting 'IRCOM 2' project – a second facility based on the IRCOM model. Located on Isabel Street between Ross and Pacific avenues, two existing Manitoba Housing apartment blocks are undergoing a multi-million-dollar renovation and will be reborn as a second IRCOM House in 2012.

IRCOM's upcoming expansion is the product of the past two decades of hard work and relationship building by committed staff, partner organizations, tenants, volunteers, and the greater Manitoban community. That's reason enough to hold a 20th anniversary event, but the party that will



GRADUATION DAY: A core IRCOM program, the Newcomer Literacy Initiative is just one of the programs with a long history at IRCOM. Here students celebrate their graduation in Central Park on June 3rd, 2011

be held in Central Park on the afternoon of Sunday, June 26th will be more than that. Dubbed an 'Immigration Celebration,' IRCOM is partnering with Knox United Church, l'Accueil Francophone du Manitoba, Welcome Place, the Entry Program, Immigrant Centre, New Journey Housing and N.E.E.D.S. to proclaim the powerful contribution newcomers have made to Manitoba.

But don't worry – the party part won't be forgotten.

The entire city is invited to come by Central Park between 2 p.m. and 6 p.m. on June 26. There will be live music, dancing, a bubble station, a mini soccer tournament, booths, a cultural village and more. What better way to celebrate the remarkable contributions newcomers have made to Manitoba and to look forward to IRCOM's next 20 years? The future is wide open.

Rachel Derksen was a practicum student at IRCOM from fall 2010 until April 2011, and has continued volunteering by writing articles for The Shout. Originally a farm girl from Saskatchewan, she has just graduated with a BA in Social Science and is considering her future plans.



Who are you?

My name is Fitsum Getahun. I'm married and I'm a mom – I have a two-year-old boy. I came to Canada in 2009. I'm from Ethiopia. Back home I was a teacher – I hold a Master's degree in Education. Here in Canada I have two part-time jobs. I'm working at IRCOM, and as a

Neighbourhood Immigrant Settlement Worker.

What is your role here at IRCOM?

At IRCOM I work as the Asset Building Program Coordinator, which is a program developed by SEED Winnipeg and now we are replicating that program. It's about teaching newcomers how to save money and all the financial aspects of life in Canada. I have been working with IRCOM since August 2010. Once we accept newcomers into the program, they really impress me because they are consistent in coming to classes, and they are eager to learn and change their financial situations. I just like working with newcomers. I like their consistency.

Between having a family and your jobs, do you have time for anything else?

I enjoy writing poems in my own language and reading fiction. I like reading detective stories. I don't know why, but I enjoy it. Because of the suspense, I think – once I start it pushes me to keep reading. I read many books from Agatha Christie. She's my favourite.

Is there anything exciting coming up for your program?

Yeah! We're trying to expand the program. So we are going to invite a family with an adult or teen child to money management training, to learn as a family. We're going to start hopefully in August. It's not required but we're going to try it as a pilot. I'm looking forward to it.

Giving seems more like receiving

Serial volunteer followed her passion, and discovered a rich, new world

By Rachel Derksen

Anne Mahon is a serial volunteer – at her children's schools, St. Ignatius Church, and – for the last four years – at the Newcomer Literacy Initiative.

But it's funny, she says, how giving actually seems to be more like receiving. Like the time last year when her friend Raqiya, a Somali woman and a student in her EAL (English as an Additional Language) class invited Anne to a daughter's wedding celebration. She recalls being the only Caucasian there and one of only a few without her head covered. But what stood out for her was how welcomed she felt, dancing amid all those beautiful scarves and warm faces.

"The women that night were so kind to me," she recalls. "It's hard to describe briefly how inclusive they were to me and how much they made me feel welcome. At one point I was on the dance floor, dancing to some Somali song, thinking, 'How did I get here?' And I thought, 'I know how I got here. It's because I wanted to be here.' And I've loved it. I've just loved it."

The story captures Anne's approach to volunteering. Look for what you love, and keep looking until you find something that feeds you deeply. Go searching, Anne says, and "don't be afraid of all the boundaries that your mind can envision because something would be new to you. Just go and give it a try."

Anne has been a Winnipegger almost all her life – she moved away once, but soon came back because she missed the city. She now lives here with her husband and their three teenagers. The 45-year-old is an avid reader, plays tennis, does yoga, makes a mean chocolate cake, and is working her way through an African cookbook she was given for her last birthday.

"My life philosophy is that only you can make yourself happy," she says immediately when asked about her outlook on life. "You have to go in search of what makes you happy."

One morning a week, Anne shows up at Victoria Albert School, home to one of three Newcomer Literacy Initiative classes offered by IRCOM. These are unique classes because most participants have young children, whom they bring to class. With no money for daycare, these learners can't attend regular EAL classes.

Volunteers such as Anne play a critical role. Her role ranges from leading a small group in reading to assisting students one-on-one. No matter what the task, her aim is to be welcoming, supportive and encouraging to the students.

Her favourite part?

"Talking to all the students during coffee time," she says. "I like all of it, but that's my favourite."



Volunteers in Action



LEARNING FROM EACH OTHER: Pelagia Mamazo, Anne Mahon, Ta Mla Taw, and Huda Alani have found friendship and joy in a Newcomer Literacy Initiative classroom.

The language barrier makes communication tricky sometimes, but Anne loves to hear the bits and pieces about students' lives. She only wishes she were fluent in their languages so she could ask more questions!

Anne's interest in hearing others' stories, like her devotion to volunteering, is long-standing. Always on the hunt for something meaningful to spend her time on, Anne is currently writing a book about African refugees.

The book, she says, will tell personal life stories of 15 to 20 Africans who have made Winnipeg home. The project has been ongoing for the last number of years, and once it is finished, proceeds will be returned to the African community through post-secondary scholarships and micro lending opportunities. She hopes to have the collection available in 2012.

Part of an ongoing series to highlight the contributions of IRCOM volunteers. Anne Mahon wrote a moving piece on how working with newcomers gave her a renewed appreciation for her country. You can find it in the Spring 2008 edition of The Shout. (ircom.ca/ShoutArchives.htm)



MANY VOICES: IRCOM Ambassadors, youth, staff and volunteers pose after a fantastic evening at Graffiti Gallery featuring the many talents of IRCOM youth.

Kids tell their stories, and open their hearts

By Carol Sanders

Reprinted with permission from the April 21, 2011, edition of the Winnipeg Free Press

What's it like to be the refugee kid? An after-school program at IRCOM House got a bunch of them to write the book on it.

"They're very, very personal stories," Mavis Matenge, a volunteer who helped with the book, titled Give Voice, Open Your Ears, said on Wednesday.

From a kid right off the plane with minimal English language skills but huge ambition, to a university student's struggle in a class on terrorism where he's painted as the bad guy -- their world views are full of surprises.

They've filled a 30-page book with stories and illustrations that will be released tonight at Graffiti Gallery.

There's Rachel from Congo who fled to Rwanda, then Uganda and worked as a maid at age 14 before moving to Canada. At one point, she, her mom and sister spent three months living under a tree. "We relied on luck to find food," she wrote.

There's Shorsh from Kurdistan who recalled being the only Muslim in a university class discussion on terrorism when a student said "Islam is like a contagious disease." His unsettling recollection has a happy ending, recounting the way his fellow students shot down the absurd comments and how that inspired him.

Some kids in the writing club were newcomers just learning English. Others had stories that were difficult to tell for other reasons.

"Initially there were some who were hesitant to share," said Matenge. "We tried to open the door for creativity," said the international student, here on a four-year scholarship from Botswana. "They were using other modes, like artwork and poetry that helped."

Jima from Sudan, for instance, may not have known a lot of English but he knew exactly where he wants to be when he grows up. He drew a picture of a tall building with his office on the top floor, labelled CEO.

One writer recalls the perils of escaping Somalia on a rusty old cargo ship. Another describes what it was like settling here when his dad worked for minimum wage to support seven kids.

"Bearing in mind how much these young people have overcome and where they have been, they're courageous in sharing their stories," said Matenge, who is working on her PhD and plans to return to Botswana next year.

Ellen Street Insider

Ellie is super pumped these days as she looks forward to her 20th birthday bash. She can't wait to catch up with old friends, groove to the **EXILE.Z** and have her face painted with IRCOM's new logo. ... Speaking of face-lifts, IRCOM House enjoyed rejuvenation this spring with the help of staff and volunteers who scoured the hallways with buckets, brooms, windex and determination recently. **Erin Anderson** is happy to report that there is no more ketchup in the 3rd floor stairwell. ... Ellie has found herself in some great company lately with the addition of two new staff members. **Bemnet Hailegiorgis** joined the Asset Building Program as an assistant to **Fitsum Getahun**, and **Alex Garcia** took over as program support worker with the After School Program. While Ellie continues to mourn the loss of **Tyler Morden** (former IRCOM program support worker), she stays connected by following his amazing work on facebook while he completes a placement in Uganda through Mines Action Canada. This week he's off to Ethiopia, so the office was abuzz with suggestions on whose relatives he might stop in to visit. ... Finally, **Jim Beckta** returned from another extended trip to Bolivia over the winter and Ellie was most thrilled to have Jim and his goat stories back at home.



CLEAN SWEEP: After an extensive clean-up of IRCOM House and surroundings, a team of IRCOM residents and volunteers, led by Habtamu Wedajo (second from left), takes a well deserved break.

The Plug *Help us welcome new Canadians*



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