



The Ellen Street Shout

Winter 2015



WINTER BRINGS UNIQUE CHALLENGES TO NEWCOMERS

How do you feel about winter?" Do you, like Robert Byrne, believe that "Winter is nature's way of saying 'Up yours?' Maybe, ever the optimist, you take a stance like John Steinbeck, who challenges the dread of winter with this simple question: "What good is the warmth of summer, without the cold of winter to give it sweetness?"

Often winter is seen as a time to be warm and snug inside. As described by Edith Sitwell, "Winter is the time for comfort, for good food and warmth, for the touch of a friendly hand and for a talk beside the fire: it is the time for home."

But what if your image of home has nothing to do with ice, snow, and a wind so cold that it burns?

For many of our city's newest residents, winter is a foreign concept and it brings with it a steep learning curve and a host of extra challenges for people already working hard to adapt to a new culture, a new language and new friends.

"I used to cover myself so much that even turning was difficult such that I could easily be hit by a car," explains Peter Karari. Peter came to Canada from Kenya in September of 2009. Now a seasoned Winnipegger, he describes his first winter as "devastating." "I suffered so much through the first winter. I was depressed. I didn't believe I could go on living here or even survive the winter."

Yusuf and his family arrived in Winnipeg from Saudi Arabia in May of 2014 and had yet to see snow for the first time, or experience their first winter season. "Everybody says winter is coming. I know it's not good," Yusuf reported in the fall with questions in his eyes. In Saudi Arabia, temperatures rarely fall below 35°C. At the time, he had not started preparing for winter and didn't know how to.

It's a bleak outlook, but there is hope. Peter found the key to surviving and thriving during a Winnipeg winter: warm clothing. "The remedy for winter is warm clothing. Nobody can ever say they are used to winter, not even Canadians who are born here," he argues. "Winter is still the same winter."

To everyone embarking on their first taste of sub-zero temperatures, Peter advises consulting the veterans. Those who have lived through it already can share information about what kind of jacket to buy, how to cover your face, and where to find gloves that keep your fingers warm. And finally, follow the lead of the children: don't be afraid to like it. "If I was alone I wouldn't go outside, but with the kids we go to the tobogganing slides, make snowmen, and fight with the snow. You want to fill the needs of the kids so you find yourself outside."



Photo credit to Lisa Meyers; Photos by Meyers for background photo

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

The very first gift my parents ever gave me was my name. It consists of three parts, the first two chosen especially for me and the last one rooted in family history, giving me an identifiable connection to a specific nuclear family, extended family network, and cultural history; in short, the beginnings of my identity. Although my identity is expanding as I grow older, the connotations of that name gifted to me so early in life linger on, gently flavouring the choices I make.

With that in mind, picture this scene:

A 16-year-old boy arrives in a refugee camp, alone. He has been waiting anxiously all afternoon to be registered in the camp so he can receive his ration card and be provided with basic needs. There are people milling around everywhere, talking loudly. Everyone is waiting to be registered by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) agent, who has been working unceasingly for hours, doing her best to help the unending wave of incoming refugees before dark. Finally the boy is brought up to the agent. "What is your name?" She has to shout to be heard, but even this is useless because the boy doesn't speak English. After much back and forth, the boy says his name. "What?" The agent tries to repeat it, but the unfamiliar sound combination trips up her tongue. The boy repeats it. The agent looks up hopelessly, sees the gathered crowd still waiting to see her, and feels the overwhelming burden of her enormous task. Taking a deep breath, she makes a decision. "I'm going to call you Eric," and she leans over her desk and writes it down.

This is more or less how it went for Bisetsa Bahati. In the midst of the chaos of camp his whole identity shifted. "A new name is like being a different person, it is like turning you around," says Bahati. "I was afraid to say 'no', I didn't want to complain. I didn't want to be seen as a difficult person."

Unfortunately, this new name had a profound impact on Bahati's identity. When others from his village arrived and asked about him, no one in the camp could identify him. Bahati remained separated from his family for over ten years.

As he reflects on his experience, Bahati describes the situation in terms of power. Because a refugee arriving at a camp needs what the camp has with no other alternative for getting it, the agent registering you becomes the one with all the power. "You are powerless, you no longer have dignity. Someone else says, 'This is who you are, this is who you can be.' It's sad to see how it can make you a different person," Bahati says.

So the next time someone asks me for my name, I will tell it proudly, knowing that in doing so, I am sharing with someone a piece of who I am and who I am connected to in this world.

In 2014, after 11 years of being known as Eric, Bisetsa Bahati finally corrected the agent's mistake. When I met him in June of 2014, he introduced himself to me as Bisetsa.



AROUND IRCOM



Volunteers in Action



VOLUNTEERS WIELD POSITIVE INFLUENCES EVERYDAY

“What are you waiting for?” Ramogi challenges everyone who has ever considered getting involved in volunteer work. “It’s a great experience for both parties, for you as a volunteer and the kids.”

Ramogi Nyonje has become a long-term volunteer at IRCOM and has been part of some of IRCOM’s lesser-known programs. He started out as the coach for the U17 Boys’ basketball team, and this year began helping in the youth leadership program and occasionally coming to homework club.

One of the notable things about Ramogi is the way he uses whatever activity he is presented with as a way to build relationships with the youth and inspire confidence in them.

“The volunteers have a lot of influence on these kids, a lot more than I thought I would have,” he notes.

Being the coach of the basketball team gives him plenty of opportunity to create situations to wield that influence positively. One day, Ramogi set up a competition to prove to his players that attitude and heart can influence the outcome of a game. He divided the team up for a scrimmage: all of the bigger players on one side, and all of the smaller players on the other. “Some of them don’t believe in themselves,” he explains. “Just talking to them pushes them to surprise even themselves.” Though the smaller team didn’t win every round, they did win one. “By the end, they were like, ‘Can we keep going? Let’s do it again,’” Ramogi grins.

For Ramogi, volunteering is a way to make good use of his time. He chose IRCOM because he feels connected to the people here. Many of the youth come from Eastern Africa, as he did himself. He has been a newcomer more than once, first in Germany, then returning to Kenya after seven years away, and then again when he arrived in Canada. He relates well with the challenges the youth are facing.

One of the crowning features of volunteering at IRCOM is the warm, family atmosphere. “It makes me look forward to coming. The staff among each other, the youth among each other, the staff and youth together...It’s like family. I thought, I want to be part of this.”

All of that said, Ramogi makes one more comment that captures so accurately the hope of IRCOM. When asked what drew him to us, Ramogi says very simply, “I can fit in here.”



WHO ARE YOU?

With Aiman Syed



1. Tell us about yourself.

My name is Aiman Syed. I’m a Foundations teacher with the Newcomer Literacy Initiative, found at Hugh John MacDonald School. I only ever come to IRCOM to bother the other staff and occasionally to do work. I’m always up for an event that involves eating food.

2. What do you do at IRCOM?

As a teacher in the NLI program I teach a class from 9-11:30 in the morning and 1-3:30 in the afternoon. I have approximately 16 students in each class and we go over the basics of literacy and getting a functional level of English (reading, writing, speaking and listening) so that students can then move to a more formal CLB classroom, whether within IRCOM or any program in the city.

3. What do you like most about IRCOM?

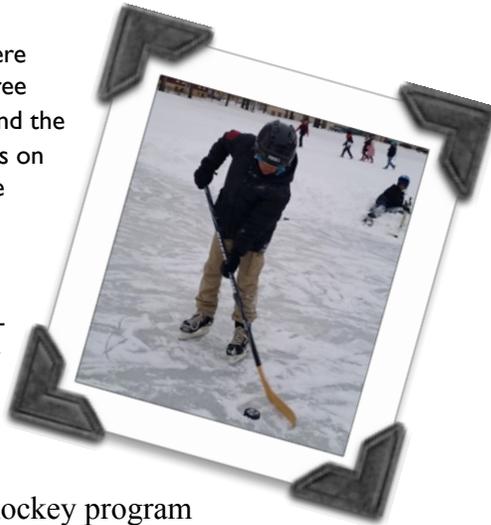
Carol Rebudal’s hugs and Fitsum’s advice on our walks home. I also enjoy harassing CRP, especially intimidating Richard and posing as Talatu. My evil twin Irene and I are constantly being foiled in our mischievous plots by the wise Vanessa.

4. What do you do when you’re not at IRCOM?

I actually don’t know! What DO I do when I’m not at IRCOM? Now I will be giving parenting advice to my brother and sister-in-law about my new niece, and before she was born I had no life.

NEW LEASE ON ICE-VOTE NOW!

“The winters of my childhood were long, long seasons. We lived in three places – the school, the church, and the skating rink – but our real life was on the skating rink. Real battles were won on the skating rink. Real strength appeared on the skating rink. The real leaders showed themselves on the skating rink.” – Roch Carrier, *The Hockey Sweater*



IRCOM's New Lease on Ice hockey program has been selected as one of ten finalists for this year's GoodLife Kids Foundation! With your help, we could receive a grant of \$25,000 to develop our program and provide more access to wintertime recreation and activity to the children we serve. To help out, go online to www.win4kids.com and vote for IRCOM. Voting is open until 11:59pm on March 6, 2015.



The kids have been pestering staff to get this program up and running since the snow first fell with claims like, “Hockey day is the best day ever!” Your vote can help us make the kids' wishes a priority!

WIGGLE, GIGGLE, MUNCH!

Communities 4 Families has once again provided funding for us to run a Wiggle, Giggle & Munch program! It aims to support parents with young children to engage in healthy activity and play together. We are very excited this year because we are partnering with Dufferin School to run the program. We are enjoying building new relationships in the community and getting to know the Centennial neighbourhood more,

as we prepare to move in to IRCOM Isabel. Our ten week sessions runs every Thursday from 1-3.

Transportation is available. Please contact Carol Reimer (204-943-8765x33 or carolr@ircom.ca) for more details!



It has been a season of changes for Ellie. Saying goodbye to Community Resource Program Manager Peter Karari and Youth and Children's Support Worker Muluken Tegegne has been sad for her, but nonetheless she smiles and wishes them well in all their new endeavours. Mbula Makau has moved from Office Administrator to Asset Building Program Assistant, and After School Program Support Worker Amal Shire has become the new Systems Navigator. Ellie is thrilled to welcome Shauna Neault-Pawlychyn into her new role as an Early Childhood Educator II in



IRCOM's Childcare program. Her arrival has been much anticipated! Ellie also looks forward to some upcoming welcomes of a different sort, as a wave of baby fever seems to have hit. Best wishes and safe deliveries for all! Then, of course, there have been many great vacations worth mentioning. Volunteer and Community Services Program Manager Erin Anderson spent ten days running a girl's leadership camp in Ghana, Volunteer and Community Services Program Assistant Vanessa Kornelsen spent a week in Northern Manitoba checking out the culture near a reserve, and Mexico has been lucky enough to get visits from Agnieszka Sheehan, Noelle DePape, Dorota Blumczynska, Manuel Zuniga and Marko Gjuric! Ellie herself is still blanketed in snow, but dreams of the day when she can feel the warm sun again!

The Plug *Help us welcome new Canadians*



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By donating to IRCOM online at www.canadahelps.org (type "IRCOM" in the search box). Please consider signing up for a monthly donation via MasterCard or Visa (even a few dollars a month makes a difference). To donate by cheque call our office at 943-8765

SHOUT IT OUT: Subscribe by emailing editor Vanessa Kornelsen at vanessak@ircom.ca.