



‘You need to do something’

Mosaic Merit Award winner has a passion for advocacy

By Adam Wazny

Reprinted courtesy of the Winnipeg Free Press

For Louise Simbandumwe, the building is still in flames. Thirty years ago, Simbandumwe and her family left everything behind to seek refuge in India. Their home in Burundi was disintegrating by the day and blood from the wide-spread massacres that claimed the lives of relatives and close friends was spilling closer.

After the family arrived with nothing but the clothes on their backs, any hope of returning to the life they imagined was dashed when her parents received a letter from home.

“My mom and dad were on the list of people to be killed,” said Simbandumwe, now 41. “We weren’t going back.”

That’s why she has devoted her life to assisting others. She helps those who arrive in Canada with nothing, or those who haven’t yet found their way, to invent new circumstances for themselves.

“It’s almost not a choice; it’s something that I have to do,” Simbandumwe said Tuesday, prior to receiving the Mosaic Merit Award. The honour is given annually by the Immigrant and Refugee Community Organization of Manitoba to recognize the contributions of new Canadians in areas like social justice and community support.

“It’s kind of like escaping a burning building. You made it out, but there are people still in there, and they’re screaming. You need to do something to help,” Simbandumwe said.

Working with SEED Winnipeg, an organization that provides employment and economic development in low income families, Simbandumwe has helped develop financial programs designed to give new Canadians a head start. One of those initiatives is an asset building venture, where people save money that is matched so they can purchase the things they need, whether it’s a house or a bed for their children.

“They’re coming here to start over,” she said. “They have nothing, so developing assets for them is a priority.”

Noëlle DePape, the executive director of IRCOM, said the impact of Simbandumwe in the community development field is immeasurable. Not only does she provide a model for new refugees as they attempt to build up from nothing, but she also keeps service providers in touch with the needs of families.

“She keeps us accountable, which is sometimes overlooked in the support process,” DePape said.

Simbandumwe downplayed the accolades she received Tuesday. The work she’s done, whether here in Winnipeg or abroad for Amnesty International, doesn’t deserve mention, she feels.

“Being a refugee is a violent uprooting,” she said. “I remember just not really knowing what the next day would bring, and it was tough to find a level of comfort through that. Figuring out a way to build a life in a new environment was difficult.”



MANY ADMIRERS: Premier Greg Selinger presented the 2010 IRCOM Mosaic Award to Louise Simbandumwe.

Simbandumwe snapshot

Born in Burundi, raised in India and Saskatchewan; Rhodes scholar; Bachelors degree in Commerce and Masters in Comparative Social Research. Volunteered with Amnesty International, the Winnipeg Poverty Reduction Council, ACT (A Centre for Transformation), the Connecting Communities Coalition and HIV/AIDS awareness programs. Worked on development projects in Bangladesh, India, and South Africa, helped to found Mondragón Bookstore and Coffee House, a worker’s collective based on participatory economic principles.

“I’m one of the people who has been really lucky, like winning the lottery. Lots of other people are living difficult lives open to exploitation. If you are born in a particular place with particular conditions, your potential can be so limited. That’s true overseas, in Canada, anywhere. There were so many opportunities open to me. I feel an obligation to make opportunities open to others.” Louise Simbandumwe

Laid-back student makes it look easy

Let the people you're assisting be your guide, she advises

With a gift for the gab, Janine Bramadat has the perfect solution for bridging the awkward silence that plagues most cross-cultural meetings – chatting openly with folks like she's known them since kindergarten. A practicum student from St. James, uncomfortable is one of the last words that comes to mind when working with Janine.

"Janine is a total natural," says community resource worker Kiran Pramesh. "Since she arrived at IRCOM she's been the perfect addition to our team. Even on her days off she's been available by phone and has come in at the oddest hours to help out."

With a BA in Criminology and Philosophy already under her belt and just one year away from finishing up her Honours Degree in Sociology, Janine makes it all seem easy. From her laid back nature to her willingness, always with a smile, to take on huge projects – such as IRCOM's recent bike-a-thon – Janine is humility in action.

"As volunteers sometimes we expect to be the guide for others," says Janine. "But, if we take a step back we more often discover how much we have to learn and how others are meant to be guides for us."

She says her father, who is originally from Trinidad, and mother were strong role models. As a child, she helped out her parents with healthy living symposiums and cross-country meets, learning valuable lessons about community building in the process.

Most recently Janine was busy planning IRCOM's first ever stationary bike-a-thon in partnership with

the St. James Assiniboia-School Division. The event, the brainchild of Janine and her father Derek Bramadat, would not have been possible without her commitment to the project. The event raised \$5,100 for IRCOM, but Janine, as usual, downplayed her role.

"My Dad suggested the idea and it just came together," she says. "It wasn't really too much work."

A proponent of taking each day at a time, Janine remains unsure of what her future will hold; working for a non-profit, attaining her Masters at a university in Barcelona, or becoming a lawyer are just a few of the options in front of her.

Regardless of where she ends up, one can be confident that she will be putting new friends at ease wherever she goes. As Janine says, "I would rather sit down and talk with people to find out about their needs than read theories about settlement – it's when we listen to people's stories that change really begins to take shape."

Part of an ongoing series to highlight the contributions of IRCOM volunteers.

Volunteers in Action



Janine Bramadat and father Derek at the bike-a-thon fundraiser.



Who are you?

My name is Habtamu Wedajo. I am from Ethiopia, but I came to Canada from a refugee camp in Kenya. I studied sociology and political science. I am now the community resource coordinator here at IRCOM.

Why did you choose Winnipeg? Were you attracted by our enjoyable climate?

It was not a choice. I came through a private sponsorship, and my sponsor lives here in Winnipeg, so this is where I came. I had done a lot of research about Winnipeg before coming. I thought I knew a lot about it, but knowing about it is different than living it. I find there is a good sense of community here. The people are very friendly and supportive.

Tell us about your job here at IRCOM.

The community resource coordinator works to support newcomers and help them settle in. I help them by finding them accommodation, helping them learn about life in the city and what resources are available to them, register their kids in school and get them in an after school program. I also help with things like finding a family doctor or finding employment.

What do you do when you're not working?

I like to listen to music, meet friends at coffee shops, play tennis, and read. When I was in the refugee camp in Kenya, we formed a library. Those who had books decided to share them. Eventually we kept them all in one place. Students from Europe started donating books, and we had no place to put them. We asked for a tent. Now it is a very nice library.

Talking dollars and making sense

By Michael Etkin IRCOM volunteer

Raising four children is difficult under the most ideal circumstances. For Glory Patrick, her children's education is a top priority.

"All of them are in school" she explains, "a computer would help them for homework".

Home computers are an everyday purchase for most Canadians, but not for Glory and her husband Bay Ther. She is a Karen, a people from Burma, and spent many years in a refugee camp before she and Bay Ther arrived in Winnipeg three years ago as government-sponsored refugees. Both have low-income jobs (Glory works at IRCOM as a child-care worker) and with four teenagers aged 12 to 18 to feed and clothe, money is very tight.

Saving is something that challenges most Canadians; even those with much larger family incomes struggle with choices between wants and needs. Compounding the challenge facing Glory is that she has no experience in budgeting. In fact, money was virtually unknown in the refugee camp as commercial transactions were done the old-fashioned way – by barter.

Though learning to budget and saving for a computer are major challenges, newcomers at IRCOM House don't have to face that challenge alone. This past winter, IRCOM offered its first Asset Building Program called the Saving Circle. From January to March, participants took part in a 10-week money management training program adapted to an EAL (English as an Additional Language) format with culturally relevant information about transportation loans, the Refugee Assistance Program (RAP) and how to deal with issues such as the pressure to send money back home. The Asset Builders Program was designed to help low-income Canadians face their financial challenges by arming them with information directly relevant to their lives.

The program itself has three major goals: education (especially keeping track of your expenses and how to create a household budget); a savings incentive plan; and one-on-one support.

Budgeting on a limited income is a necessary skill, but it's not easy. Let's face it, we all spend more than we plan to, and unexpected expenses come up all the time.

"It was hard living in the (refugee) camp, but it was also hard learning these things," said Glory.

Glory and the other participants had an extra incentive to learn how to budget. Thanks to the generosity of funders such as the United Way of Winnipeg, SEED Winnipeg Inc, the Assiniboine Credit Union and the Province of Manitoba, Saving Circle participants who saved a maximum of \$250 over six months received a 3:1 match to a maximum of \$750. The total savings of \$1,000 would be used by the participants towards the purchase of a pre-approved asset that would benefit them, their family or their community. Glory and her family have been saving and their hard work is close to paying off. They are buying their first family computer in July.

The final component – one-on-one support – was equally important. This year, at the age of 39, Glory opened her first bank account. She said she was very nervous going to an Assiniboine Credit Union branch to open her account and was very grateful to have one of the Asset Builder instructors go with her on that first visit. Most people can relate. Even those of us who have grown up in Canada and are fluent in English often find banking complicated



PROFITING FROM KNOWLEDGE: Glory Patrick (centre) says the Asset Builders Program was hard work, but has given her skills she desperately wanted.

and confusing, to say the least.

Because everyone has different needs and goals, participants are encouraged to go to instructors with questions and seek advice on their specific situations.

SEED Winnipeg (short for Supporting Employment & Economic Development) is one of the founders of the Asset Builders Partnership and developed the Saving Circle program for low-income Winnipeggers. The IRCOM program was first designed for newcomers and 15 were chosen. All newcomers to Canada living in the downtown were eligible and apart from program specific criteria, the only other qualification was that they needed to understand English well enough to interact and participate in a group setting.

Group discussions play a large role in the classes and the IRCOM program was designed with cultural differences in mind, such as differing views of money. For example, the man of the family might have always handled the money back home but now, in Canada, if his wife is working outside the home, that might need to change. If this is the case, the wife might be making financial decisions for the first time in her life and extra support will help her make wiser decisions. Clearly, every individual has his or her own questions.

The program also encourages self-exploration centered around two important questions. What do I need? And how can I get what I need?

Asked what the most important part of the program was for her, Glory replied, "Budgeting – this is what helped me save."

At this point, IRCOM will run its Asset Builders program once a year, but the dream is to expand the program. People had to be turned away from the first class as there were more applicants than space and there is a list of people who have asked to take the next program. Glory applied for the program twice at SEED but unfortunately there simply wasn't room. Clearly this program is in high demand. In addition to running the Asset Builders program multiple times a year, IRCOM hopes to bring in the Individual Development Account (IDA). The IDA is similar to the Saving Circle in that participants earn a 3:1 match. The difference is that instead of participants saving over six months a maximum of \$250 for a match of \$750, the IDA allows participants to save up to \$1,000 over a two-year period for a maximum match of \$3,000! (The IDA program is intended for those trying to achieve large goals, either buying or renovating a home; creating an education fund for a family member; starting or expanding a small business; or supporting someone with a disability.)

There's no question about how Glory feels about the program.

"I am happy I took this program," said Glory. "I want to see it continue."

For more info on these programs, go to the Programs section at www.seedwinnipeg.ca and click on 'Asset Building Programs'



Give voice Open your ears

By Jihan Muhamad

Reprinted courtesy of the University of Winnipeg Uniter

The Immigrant and Refugee Community Organization of Manitoba (IRCOM) has two new programs to address the differences newcomers face and raise awareness through discussion.

The IRCOM Ambassadors Program, which was launched this spring, works to build dialogue for newcomers to tell their stories to the public through discussions and presentations. Faiza Hargaaya, an IRCOM ambassador, said the program helps "give people an idea of what it's like being a newcomer [in Canada]."

The Safe Harbor Program, which originated in British Columbia and was launched in Manitoba this past October, works to educate companies and businesses about diversity and inclusion.

Hargaaya is also a Safe Harbor facilitator. She said the program works to train businesses to be more open to newcomers and to create a safe place where newcomers can go if they feel in danger.

"We try to open the doors for inclusion," she said. "Once [the businesses] complete the training they get a sticker [which lets] people know they will be safe in that building."

Safe Harbor's first meeting is set for January.

On Nov. 25, the IRCOM Ambassadors Program held their first discussion called "Give Voice, Open Your Ears," during which ambassadors shared their stories with the public. Hargaaya was one of the ambassadors to share her stories. She said she thinks the launch had a good affect on those who attended.

"Everyone really responded to what we were saying," said Hargaaya (pictured above at the launch).

Muuxi Adam, a newcomer who attended the IRCOM Ambassadors launch, said the stories told were inspiring.

"Most people believe that immigrant and refugee people are helpless ... [that] we came here to take over their jobs. That's not why we're here," he said. "This type of project empowers [newcomers] that no matter where we're from ... we need to collaborate ... to build and help this country."

According to Hargaaya, many of the people who attended the event were already aware of newcomer experiences. She said the ambassadors would like to reach out to people who aren't as familiar with issues faced by newcomers.

"We would like to ... spread the word as wide as we can so we're not limited to who we're sharing our stories with," she said.

Erin Anderson, volunteer and communications co-ordinator at IRCOM, said these programs are important for people to hear different stories about new Canadians and to break the negative stereotype newcomers often face.

"People might be getting the same negative message on newcomers," she said. "[These programs are] really important for exposing people to different stories and different views on things."

Adam said the only thing he wishes is that these programs were launched sooner.

"I wish we had something like that before, that's how much I liked it," he said.

Ellen Street Insider

Ellie has been breaking into the fizzy apple juice lately... Long-time IRCOM staff member **Melanie Gonzalez** just became a mother. After chilling out in the womb for a few extra weeks, **Caleb Solomon Gonzalez** arrived into the world on April 25th weighing a whopping 10.3 lbs! **Zewdy Gebremedhin** who competed with 40 other applicants for the position of office manager is filling in for Melanie for the next year... Ellie is feeling more than a little jealous as child and youth program coordinator **Abdikheir Ahmed**, begins planning for his move to Brisbane, Australia. As a Rotary World Peace Fellow, Abdi will be leaving in January 2011 to complete his MA at the University of Queensland. Elly is expecting lots of gifts in the mail including vegemite... The biggest buzz though has been around in the head office. With **Noëlle DePape** weeks away from becoming a mother herself, **Dorota Blumcynska**, who oversees the Newcomer Literacy Initiative has been chosen interim executive director after an exhaustive hiring process involving more than 70 applicants ... Updates continue to arrive from **Tyler Morden** as he nears the end of his internship with the World University Service of Canada in Sri Lanka. **Azarias Mwumvaneza** has been doing a great job filling in for Tyler as a child & youth worker since January... From the 'get out the camera' file. Ellie was the centre of attraction in February when Housing and Community Development Minister **Kerri Irvin-Ross**, Labour and Immigration Minister **Jennifer Howard** (below) and federal Liberal MP **Bob Rae** all came calling in the space of five days.



The Plug *Help us welcome new Canadians*



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