

COMMUNITY

Employment program offers inspiration

By SUSAN O'NEILL
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When Oxana Sokol first enrolled in an employment program offered by the YWCA, she never imagined she would one day stand before a classroom of women to tell them her story.

But that's just what she last week at an event designed to inspire the women who are currently enrolled in the LEAP (Learn, Explore, Assess and Prepare) program.

"It's unbelievable that I am here," Sokol told a group of women gathered at the YWCA's offices on Kingston Road.

Sokol, who holds a PhD in chemical engineering, emigrated with her family from Moscow in 1997 in the hope of finding a better life in Canada.

UFE IN ISOLATION

But settling into a new life here has been difficult, she said.

During her first three years in Scarborough, Sokol's life was lived in isolation.

She did not have the confidence to begin looking for work or to seek opportunities to become involved in the community, she said.

But when she discovered a flier at a local library advertising the YWCA, she decided to find out more about the organization and eventually enrolled in LEAP.

"I remember Oxana when I first met her. She didn't want to say a word to anyone," said program



Mirror photo/IRVIN MINTZ

Graduated YWCA LEAP (Learn, Explore, Assess and Prepare) client Oxana Sokol, left, listens to the experiences and concerns of fellow program participants last week at the LEAP Kingston Road offices.

manager Eva Pakyam.

Sokol admitted she didn't speak to anyone in class during the first three weeks of the program.

But Tuesday morning she told others that LEAP has had a tremendous impact on her life in the past year.

"It's a great feeling," she said.

Sokol is now working as a math and science instructor in a YWCA program that helps women obtain

their high school equivalency diploma.

"I use my skills working with women," Sokol said. "It really has helped me."

LEAP offers a range of programs to women, including career planning, vocational life skills management workshops, work placement opportunities, academic upgrading and help in conducting a job search.

When Merzouk arrived in Toronto, she moved into the YWCA's Woodlawn Residence downtown. It was there that she heard about LEAP.

"It was great for me because I really felt at ease here. I found wonderful staff and wonderful teachers," said Merzouk, who now works as a vet pharmacy technician.

"Just to have this feeling that there is hope is enough," Merzouk said.

PROGRAM HELPED

LEAP graduate Jian Ping Leng, who worked as a chemical engineer before moving to Toronto from China in 1996, said she has also benefited from the program.

"I tried to find the same job in Canada," she said. "Finally I quit. I couldn't find a job doing what I did in China."

Leng discovered the LEAP program during a visit to the Morning Inside Employment Resource Centre. "It helps a lot with your confidence and your communication skills," said Leng, who is currently doing a placement in office services with the Heart and Stroke Foundation.

"I think what's so beautiful is that they inspire each other," Pakyam said. "They're all in the same boat. It's so important to have programs like this where they can come back and inspire one another," Pakyam said. "We believe the cycle will go on and evolve."

For details about the YWCA, call 416-269-0090.

"The women here have the skills. The big issue is how to connect, how to bridge that gap," Pakyam said. "Sometimes it's just the confidence and keeping motivated that gets you through."

Amal Merzouk, who left her job as a veterinarian in Algeria to move to Canada in 2002, credits the LEAP program with giving her the confidence she needed to begin a job search.