

News

REACH for the stars

By CARTER HAMMETT -- Special to the Sun

For many women in north Etobicoke, life is experienced in terms of rude realities. Gang activity has risen substantially in recent years, and the area is home to some of Toronto's most violent housing projects.

Immigration levels have also risen sharply during the last decade, with many newcomers including single parents, unable to speak English, suddenly deposited in a strange country and expected to support their families. The neighbourhood also has the highest unemployment rate in Toronto. Where do you go; to whom do you turn when you have to work, but have no idea where to start?

It's a question Margaret Kyobe found herself asking months ago when she signed on with the YWCA's Realize Employment And Career Happiness (REACH) program. The 49-year-old, soft-spoken counsellor found herself suddenly reinvented as she struggled to get by and adjust to life in a new country after arriving from her native Uganda.

"So many women graduate from college with no goals. I was overqualified but I was also too private and had low self-esteem," she says.

"REACH is a four-week employment program for women offered in two modules. The first is a two-week career exploration where women can analyze how they do academically and look at their functioning in the working world," says REACH manager Maisie Raymond-Brown. "The second part is a job search component where women acquire the necessary skills to help them obtain meaningful work."

Once accepted into the program, participants are introduced to various career and personality assessments that identify a person's interests, skills, values and work preferences. Participants learn how to research labour market information and identify job goals that lead to careers.



Margaret Kyobe, 49, signed on with the YWCA's Realize Employment And Career Happiness (REACH) program. After graduating from the four-week program, she found employment as a customer service representative with Mark's Work Warehouse.

In addition, learners also brush up on resume writing, job interview techniques and learn to consider self employment as a career option.

"We work with un- and under-employed women, who are legally able to work in Canada. There are no age limitations, and the women can be working up to 20 hours per week. Each phase can accommodate up to 20 women," Raymond-Brown says. "Women learn to juggle personal expectations and realistic decision making based on their life circumstances and marketplace demands.

"In terms of job search, we have three job developers who assist with job search strategies, consult with employers and provide leads to participants."

The program also works with employers to link them with participants by offering "Employment Action Days," networking events for agencies, employers and participants. "Some of these employers have vacancies. It gives them an opportunity to receive resumes and follow-up with interviews. Some people get hired as a result of this," Raymond-Brown says.

After graduating from the program, Margaret Kyobe found herself utilizing her transferable skills while employed as a customer service representative with Mark's Work Wearhouse. "I sell clothes that work to all types of people," she proudly asserts, while acknowledging the future.

"The program helped me open up and rediscover my potential. I never dreamed of being a saleslady. I could not take care of customer relationships, and this experience will make me a better counsellor. General employment for women is a direct challenge in our community. Women are skilled, but economically poor," she says.

Two years ago, the YWCA in collaboration with REACH funders Service Canada, identified northern Etobicoke as an under-serviced area for women, and as part of its strategic plan, decided to relocate the program to its current Albion Road address after a long downtown stint, Raymond-Brown says.

"We provide service in an under-serviced area to help women in bad economic situations identify what they can do to economically contribute to society. We serve a diverse group of people from various socio-economic backgrounds: some have high academic achievements, some are just leaving school and some have not finished high school."

Others, like Margaret Kyobe, benefit from the self actualization and career planning strategies offered by REACH.

"When I joined REACH, I learned that I had lots of skills and could not believe the potential within me. I fought oppression by opening up, something I could not do in the past. REACH is equipped to help women despite their origins, culture or status be able to find their goals."

The REACH Program is located at 1625 Albion Rd. For more information call 416-964-3883.

REACH YWCA FAQ

- A free career assessment, career planning and job search program for unemployed or underemployed women. REACH is located in north Etobicoke, and welcomes women from anywhere in the GTA. If

you're an unemployed woman, or working less than 20 hours a week, having difficulty finding meaningful work, or choosing an appropriate career path, then YWCA REACH may benefit you.

- Since the year 2000, the YWCA has increased its visibility as a voice for women, expanding the number of participants by more than 50%. It has established more programs in the western part of Toronto and now works with nearly 140% more young women and girls.

- As part of an international movement, the YWCA has touched the lives of more than 25 million women worldwide.

- YWCA Toronto is funded by the United Way of Greater Toronto, the City of Toronto, the Province of Ontario and the Government of Canada, as well as many corporate sponsors, foundations and individual donors.

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