

Finding job hard work

BY CHRIS TRABER
Staff Writer

After searching for two years, Michelle Martinez finally found a job.

James Ong continues to look.

Both newcomers to Canada are professionals. Ms Martinez holds a law degree from her native Mexico City. She now works in a private immigration and employment service office.

Mr. Ong gave up his own catering business and a full-time materials manager position in the Philippines. More than 100 job applications have resulted in a few interviews and a lot of frustration.

Married to a Canadian, Ms Martinez, a Thornhill resident, said one income was a financial burden, particularly when she was not eligible for any other monetary support.

'It was a hard decision, but Canada is the best option in the long run. I did a lot of research and was impressed with the diversity, the opportunity. Now, I'm wondering if I made the right decision.'

James Ong
Richmond Hill resident

"Getting a job was a big issue," she said. "It was a problem. Employers want the Canadian experience. So (newcomers) have to know they can't always start where they want."

Mr. Ong waited six years for an immigrant visa and arrived in Richmond Hill last June. His wife and two children remain in Manila until he can sponsor their immigration.

"It was a hard decision, but Canada is the best option in the long run. I did a lot of research and was impressed with the diversity, the opportunity. Now, I'm wondering if I made the right decision. I'm an internationally trained professional. I speak the language. Why don't I get a chance to show my skills?"

BELOW the LINE

Poverty in York Region

Part 5: Dreams denied

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JULY 20: Costs - Financial and human

JULY 27: Education - The vicious circle

AUG. 3: Health - Sick of being poor

TODAY: Immigrants - Dreams denied

AUG. 17: Solutions - The way out

"I'm finding the (job search) process somewhat discriminatory."

Dilemmas facing newcomers are put into perspective by COSTI Immigrant Services executive director Mario Calla, who cites a recent Poverty by Postal Code study in the GTA.

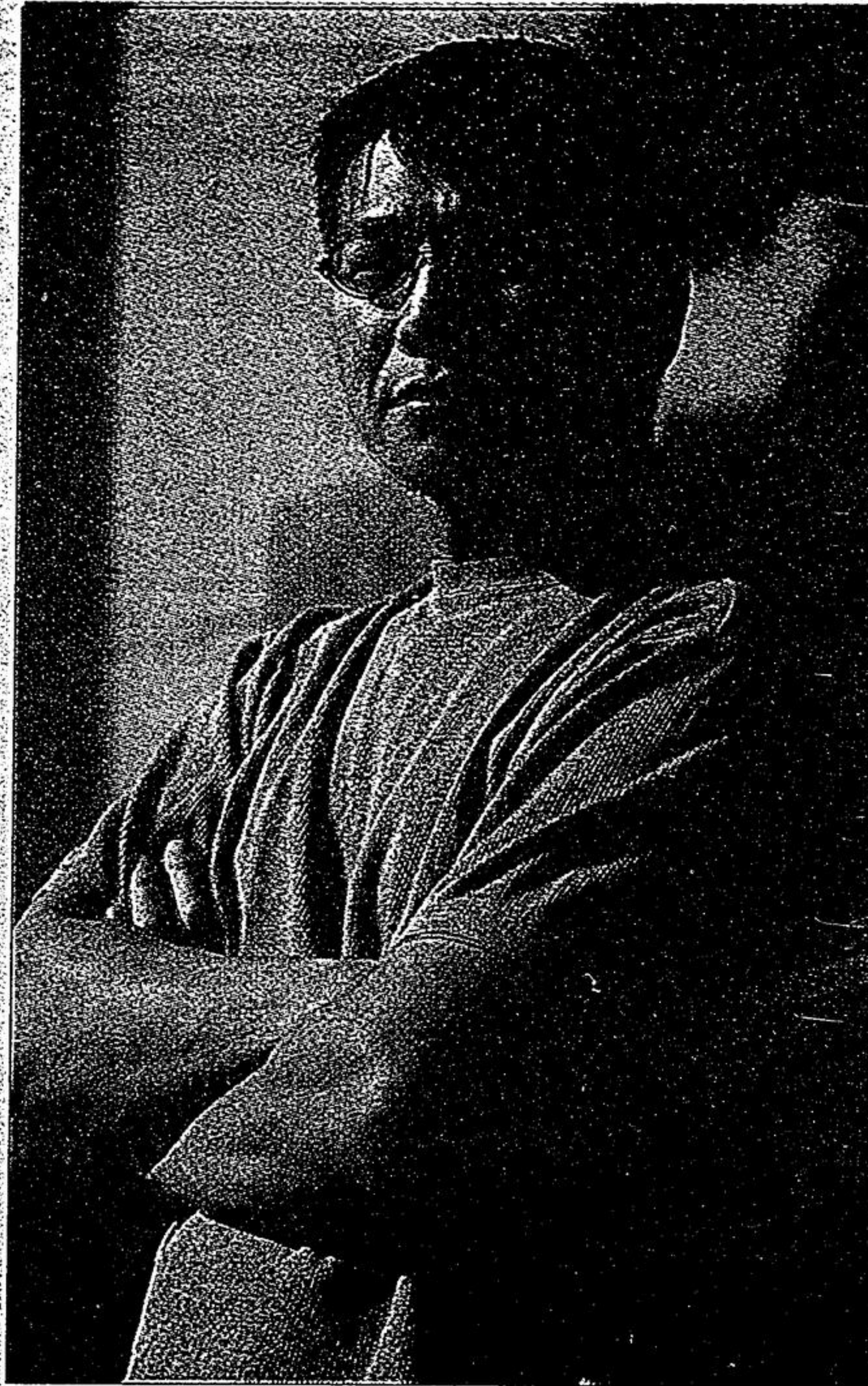
"One thing that jumped out was the fact that between 1981 and 2001, poverty, overall, grew by 14 per cent, but for immigrants, poverty grew by 125 per cent," he said. "We are looking at a very serious problem. Immigrants just aren't catching up."

The biggest challenge for new foreign-trained arrivals is accessing a job in their field, said Mr. Calla, whose agency serves 49,000 clients on average annually through a GTA network that includes three York Region offices that handle 15,000 of that total.

"The No. 1 issue (for immigrants) is getting a job that is commensurate with their skills," he said. "Within the immigrant class, 60 per cent have post-secondary education. We're getting highly skilled professionals, but they're not getting work in their field. They get jobs that don't have much of a future."

Ms Martinez and Mr. Ong are both COSTI clients. Both credit their counsellors for assisting with their job search, guidance and support.

"COSTI showed me how to do my resume and how to approach interviews," Ms



STAFF PHOTO/SJOERD WITTEVEEN

James Ong just arrived from the Philippines and is searching for a job. The full-time materials manager who owned his own catering business has sent out more than 100 job applications, which has resulted in few interviews and a lot of frustration.

Martinez said. "I now have a job I like and I'm getting the Canadian experience."

Visible minority immigrants experience high rates of unemployment and underemployment, according to Family Services Association community building and social reform director Laurel Rothman, who co-authored Immigrant Poverty in Canada with Semone Kassim.

Recent immigrants may also face greater discriminatory hiring and promotion practices, she said.

Two significant factors contribute to the situation. One is education and experience obtained by immigrants may be perceived as less relevant. In addition, difficulties in foreign credential recogni-

tion and adaptation to a new cultural and linguistic environment are particularly severe for this group.

Mr. Ong can relate. "I wasn't expecting the barriers," he said, adding he's grateful for the support provided by COSTI. "Most jobs I've applied for are outside my experience. I'm a graduate of one of the top three business schools and have more than 10 years of experience. I'm motivated and want to establish myself and my family. Yes, I'm worried."

Newcomers with a high school diploma or equivalent earn 21 per cent less than their non-immigrant counterparts and new arrivals with a degree will make up to 40 per cent less than a Canadian with similar credentials, Mr.

Calla said, citing studies.

"It's as if employers are uncertain and not willing to take a chance on newcomers, thinking that their skills are not at the Canadian standard," he said. "The result is many immigrants are living below the poverty line and it's taking its toll in a number of ways."

Being a stranger in a strange land with dwindling funds and limited prospects impacts heavily on a newcomer's physical and emotional health, Mr. Calla said.

"There's despair," he said. "Many, about 30 per cent plus, go back to their country of origin. The dream they came with is gone, they feel betrayal and anger because they got here by passing a skills test and they don't get jobs."

"Because we're government funded, they see us as a government agency. They ask, 'Why did you bring me here if I can't find decent job?'"

Marginalized newcomers face legal impasses as well.

The Community Legal Clinic of York Region provides legal services for people unable to pay for them. The clinic in Richmond Hill handles 1,500 client contacts per year and about 200 result in full representation at hearings. The majority of the clients comprise a combination of visible minorities and newcomers, executive director Dennis Baily said.

Most cases involve appeals for Canada Pension, disability and social assistance denials. Whether cases result in hearings or not, all clients are counselled on the implications and options related to their circumstance, Mr. Baily said.

Immigrant and visible minority clients face far different and more difficult challenges than non-newcomer clients, he said.

"Language poses huge barriers," Mr. Baily said. "Legalese is hard enough, but translating documents, in-person testimony in a second or third language is a complicating factor."

An immigrant's tentative status can put them at risk, he explained, adding newcomers accused of a serious criminal act can face deportation.

REGION DIVERSITY

► **GROWING:** Between 1996 and 2001, the number of foreign born individuals increased from 36 per cent of the total York Region population to 39 per cent for a total of 211,215 people. During that same period, 6 per cent (43,405) of our region's population immigrated to Canada.

► **LANGUAGE BARRIER:** In the 2001 census, 38 per cent (275,495) of the region's population reported a non-official language as their mother tongue.

► **BRONZE FINISH:** Of the 20 communities across Canada that participated in the Federation of Canadian Municipalities Quality of Life Report, York Region has the third highest proportion of households where neither official language is spoken.

► **WHO WE ARE:** The visible minority population was made up of the following groups:

- Chinese (47 per cent - 100,710)
- South Asian (22 per cent - 47,350)
- Black (7 per cent - 16,150)
- Filipino (5 per cent - 10,370)
- West Asian (4 per cent - 8,550)
- Korean (3 per cent - 5,905)
- Southeast Asian (2 per cent - 5,170)
- Arab (2 per cent - 4,935)
- Latin (2 per cent - 4,720)
- Japanese (1 per cent - 1,905)
- Other visible minorities (3 per cent - 5,910)
- Multiple visible minorities (2 per cent - 4,455)

Sources: Planning and Economic Development Committee, York Region, 2003; Statistics Canada, Census 2001.

Setting the Stage, Human Services Planning Coalition, York Region, 2004.

TORONTO STREET
DE
C.E.N.T.R.E
905-852-7382

STOUFFVILLE
DE
C.E.N.T.R.E
905-642-5777

SUNDERLAND
DE
C.E.N.T.R.E
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