



STAFF PHOTO/SUSIE KOCKERSCHIEDT

Sivan Ilangko has enjoyed the small-town charm of Stouffville since moving here in 2009, but he'd like to see the Tamil community mix with others more.

Mixed welcome for newcomers

BY PEP PHILPOTT

Country Close to the City is more than a town slogan for Sivan Ilangko. It is the reason the native of Sri Lanka calls Stouffville home.

"We wanted a bigger house. We wanted the kids to have wider exposure to other cultures," say Mr. Ilangko of the 2009 move to his Ina Lane home. "I like the country-feel close to Toronto, too."

It was his work with an international accounting firm that first drew the 46 year-old from Sri Lanka. He spent more than five years in Bahrain in the Middle East in the 1990s working as a chartered accountant with the firm Ernst & Young.

By 2001, civil war was raging back home so he sought a future in Canada, joining his wife's family in Scarborough.

Mr. Ilangko, along with his wife, Prema, and two children, are just four of the more than 13,000 people who have pushed Stouffville's population up by more than 50 per cent since 2006.

Much of that increase has come from the Tamil and other Asian communities, transforming the town's cultural profile in the process.

Mr. Ilangko says he has felt welcomed in Stouffville, but it has meant some adjustment.

TAMIL CLASSES, BOOKS

While they have found the bigger house they were looking for, the family still returns to Scarborough and Markham to meet some of their cultural needs: specific foods for Tamil dishes, a Hindu temple to practise their faith, and also for his daughter to attend Indian classical dance classes.

Mr. Ilangko is quick to add he is pleased with the cultural concessions he has found locally. He cites Tamil books in the Stouffville library and weekend Tamil language classes at Stouffville District Secondary School sponsored by the school board.

But it is really integration he seeks, not isolation.

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"I would like to see the Tamil community come forward and mix as an inclusive society rather than living in pockets," Mr. Ilangko said.

"I find once you start talking with strangers you become friends and that creates a stronger community."

But not all newcomers have felt the same welcome.

Viola Ncube moved to Stouffville from Richmond Hill in 2007.

"The welcome to Stouffville was different," says the 47-year-old social worker. "It didn't feel like the welcome of a small town that I expected."

Ms Ncube was born in Harare, Zimbabwe. She is a former diplomat who has had postings in London and Moscow. She moved to Canada in 2005.

"I have raised my kids in big cities," she said. "I was trying to look for a place that was smaller and quiet. When I did my research, I came up with Stouffville."

But the early days were difficult, with moments when she regretted

buying a house in Stouffville. She says she felt like an outsider having to fight her way in.

"Being a minority you stand out. Even in the churches. You could go into a church and no one would talk to you. That was like 'wow.'"

Ms Ncube and her son now attend a church in Toronto.

After five years living in Stouffville she says she is feeling more settled.

NO WELCOME AT CHURCH

However, like the Ilangko family, she tends to leave town to find foods more familiar to her culture. That frustrates her.

She says there is enough cultural diversity in residential areas of Stouffville that it should be reflected in the commercial and other parts of the community.

"It's little things like that, that make a difference when there's enough of them," she said.



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