



New Beginnings

By Kinjal Dagli-Shah

Coleen Gordon lost 10 pounds during her first week in Canada in the winter of 2007.

"I don't know if it was the stress of settling in a country that's not home, or just the exercise," said Coleen, laughing. The easy laugh and friendly disposition belie the Jamaican native's initial struggles – those common to all immigrants, regardless of their home country and skin colour.

Coleen moved from sunny Kingston to wintry Toronto as yet another reluctant immigrant. "People would say to me, 'It's so sunny and laidback in Jamaica, why would you want to move,'" she recalled. But in due time, the weather would be relegated to a superficial concern, superceded by more practical problems.

"It's like starting over; nobody knows you when you send out a resume," the mother of two told her husband, Kevin. But as all immigrants are wont to do, Kevin would console her with the words, "It'll be a continuation of our life; we won't lose our foundation."

And they haven't.

The couple, with their two daughters, Kishara and Monnae, now live in their first home in Stouffville. Coleen shops for groceries

that resemble the food back home, visits her family in Kingston every once in a while and enjoys the four seasons that are a reality in Canada. But the transition is hardly ever smooth, and Coleen, too, faced her share of settling woes.

A chartered accountant by profession, she found a job only after overcoming some roadblocks. "My qualifications are British because Jamaica was a British Colony. And if you don't have Canadian qualifications or experience, it's nearly impossible to find employment," she said, recalling the days when she had to shuttle between a recruiting agency and the CGA to have her degree verified.

"I had one chance to pass the CGA (Certified General Accountants) exam, otherwise I'd have had to pay a ton of money and take their courses," said Coleen, who passed at her first attempt. But she's not bragging. "I'm one of the blessed few because my agency got me contract work in the meantime. A lot of people struggle through these stages."

Obtaining a driving licence and building a credit history were some of her other practical problems, but she persevered through them. "I don't understand how you are expected to have credit history when you are new and the government has allowed you to enter. How

do you start if nobody is willing to lend you anything?" she asked.

Coleen's life is comfortable now but she will always be empathetic to the problems that newcomers face, having been through them herself. "It's a good country to live in if you have employment," she said, looking at the brighter side. Or sides, as she talks about the things she has grown to love about living here. "The sports scene is amazing. Soccer, basketball, swimming – I live to take my kids to these activities outside of school. I feel like I'm playing the games myself."

As she takes in the diversity in her workplace, and adds her own ethnic background to the melting pot that is Toronto and its surrounding areas, there's more reason to celebrate. "My birthday just went by, and we had an office lunch to celebrate it. Everyone at the table belonged to a different ethnicity, and spoke with a different accent. And we had a great time saying one sentence in different languages. I wouldn't give that up for anything," said Coleen.

Now there's something that beats the sun in Jamaica.

Kinjal Dagli-Shah can be reached at kinjal.dagli@gmail.com. If you have a story to share, or an experience to relate, she would be happy to hear from you.



Coleen Gordon, seen here with her daughter, Kishara, moved to Canada with her family in 2007.

Taking Care OF BUSINESS

By Bruce Stapley
Stouffville Free Press

**Multi-Talented
Multiverse Owner
Takes Over as
Strawberry Festival
Chair**

Catherine McCowan has added another job to her extracurricular list. The owner/operator of The Multiverse on Main St. is settling in as Chair and President of the Strawberry Festival for 2010. Having sat on the Festival committee for five years, the 15 year Stouffville resident and

mother of three children headed up children's entertainment at this year's festival. She is looking to involve more newcomers and teens in next year's event. "We want to bring in more people between the ages of 12 and 20," she said. "We haven't been that strong in that age group."

Catherine says the completion of 19 on the Park, along with the revamping of Memorial Park and Civic Square, can only enhance the festival. "We want to work with the Town to leverage these additions to make for an even better festival." She said the hiring of festival event coordinator

Kristina Toomey on a full time basis, made possible by the \$155,000 Trillium Grant earlier this year, has also made a big difference. While Kristina was brought in just in time for this year's festival, Catherine feels her talents will manifest themselves as time goes by. "Her specialty is event planning and coordinating. She's involved in fund raising and setting up plans, things that were tough to do when it was all being done by volunteers."

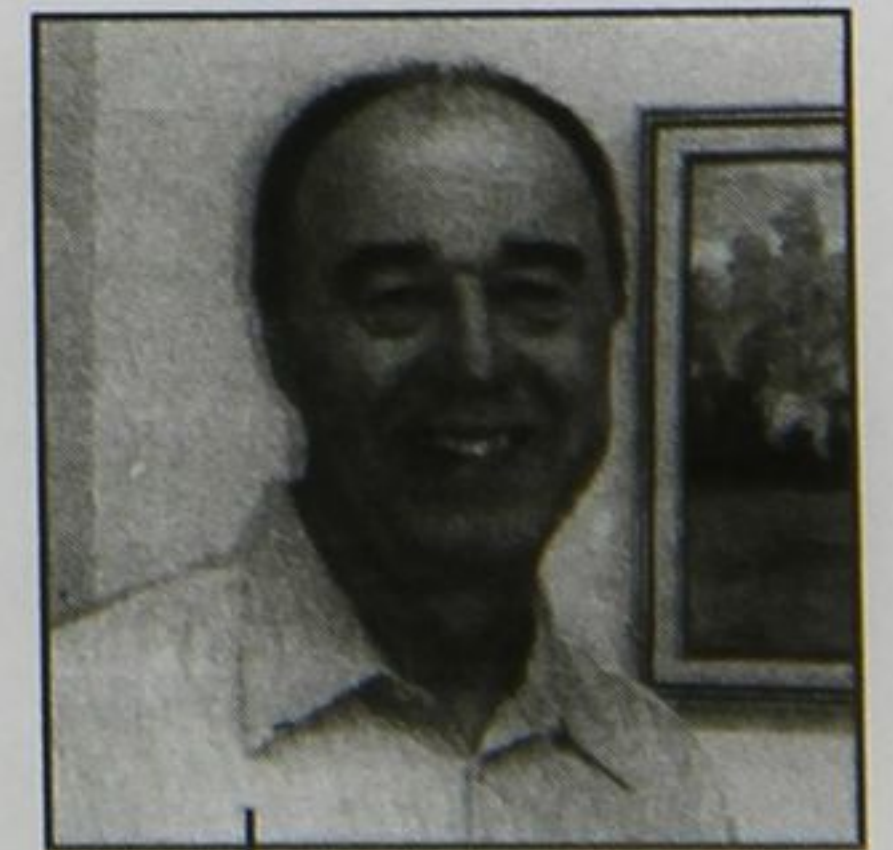
**Festival Committee
VP Designed
Provincial Parks**

Harry French has covered a lot of ground in his time. The Strawberry Festival Board vice president currently runs his own consulting practice, called Metapaxis, which sees him involved in organizational and leadership development centering around community engagement in areas such as health care and the environment. He also found time to chair the 19 on the Park start up team which organized the theatre's glorious two week grand opening extravaganza last spring.

But his roots go much deeper into the ground. Harry earned an undergraduate degree in Forestry from the

University of Guelph. He went on to acquire a second degree in Resource Planning, riding his talents all the way to the position of Assistant Deputy Minister of Tourism for Ontario back in the mid 1970's. He held similar positions in Prince Edward Island and Alberta over the next decade.

Harry designed what is now Sandbanks Provincial Park. "We came up with a master plan combining Outlet Park with Sandbanks Park, and the province bought the point of land in the middle and tied the two together," said Harry. He also designed Awenda Provincial Park north of Midland, and helped coin the buzz words used by the province to promote tourism. "We came up with the 'Ontario - Incredible' program, and in our 'Biggest and Best' program, we first used phrases like 'The World's Largest Skating Rink' for the Rideau Canal."



Harry French



Catherine McCowan presents plaque for Outstanding Performance and Lasting Contribution to the Strawberry Festival for 2009 to Rob Raycroft, representing the Town of Whitchurch-Stouffville.

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