

Building Relationships through Creativity

By Lin Wang



Kimberly

One of the hardest things for immigrants is leaving behind their friends and family for a land where they know few people. Three immigrant students who moved to British Columbia from different countries all managed to build relationships and establish connections in their new community by getting involved in the creative arts.

Musical Mentors

When Mackenzie, a Korean student who has just graduated from high school, first came to Canada, she faced more than language barriers.

“There weren’t a lot of Korean immigrants, so the kids at my school found me foreign,” she said. “I was rejected, at first, for my ethnicity... and bullied for my Korean name.”

Her negative experiences instilled in her a poor view of her own heritage. She struggled to gain acceptance from children around her, but it was difficult, so she focused instead on reading avidly and learn English quickly. The writing exercises assigned in her English as a Second Language (ESL) class led her to become interested in writing and her teachers

recommended that she join the School Alliance of Student Songwriters (now called Songwriters of a New Generation).

She felt hesitant, but eventually agreed to participate. Her decision would turn out to have a great impact on her professional and social life. In the program, she met David Blair and Don McLeod, two well-known songwriters in the Canadian Underground Music world. Under their coaching, she learned song writing techniques and wrote an original song, “Keep It Up”, which allowed her to become the youngest finalist of the national Songs That Make a Difference contest.

Four years later, Mackenzie remains in contact with her mentors. She continues writing songs, as well as singing for six online choral groups and hosting her own YouTube channel. Although she still faces problems with peers in her daily life, her musical pursuits have increased her confidence and given her an outlet for stress.

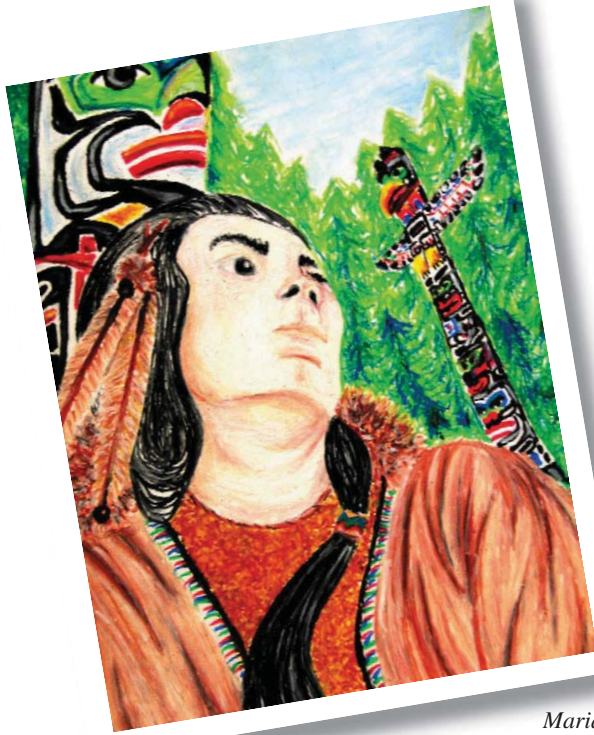
Looking back, she is very grateful for the help of the School Alliance of Student Songwriters and advises immigrant students to get involved in their community. “Join clubs, even if you can’t speak English properly. Be open to different opportunities. Fear is what holds most of us back, and all it takes is that tiny bit of courage to shine.”

The Power of Art

In Guatemala, Maria was one of the top students of her grade eight class. But when she moved to Canada, she found it “very difficult to adjust to [her] new life”. She did not speak English, so her new school did not allow her to take social studies or science classes. Instead, she was placed into an ESL program.

“My first year at school was very lonely,” she recalled. “I had... meltdowns during class. It took me an extremely long time to fit in.”

Despite these difficulties, she found support in her teacher, who gave her picture books with simple English. She enjoyed reading, browsed for more books to challenge herself, and stumbled across Manga (Japanese graphic novels).



Maria's Art

She started drawing to deal with boredom and loneliness, but eventually found people who shared her interests. One of her classmates wanted to start a Manga Club at school, so she decided to get involved: "I thought it would be cool if I joined to draw and meet new people." She became one of the club organizers, convinced teachers to sponsor the club, obtained a room, and planned activities. In the club, she made friends with other immigrant artists who inspired her and encouraged her to get out of her comfort zone.

"Art is a way of expressing yourself as an individual. Being surrounded by artists... it makes you think how much talent there is in the world, the art skill that you can achieve, how much imagination these artists have." Since running the club two years ago, Maria has continued to expand her involvement in the art community. She now attends life-drawing sessions hosted by Basic Inquiry, the Vancouver Life Drawing Society, where she meets artists and receives constructive criticism. She also takes part in events where she meets professionals within her field to network and obtain feedback, as well as shares her art and participate in contests online. In September, she will begin her studies at Emily Carr University with the goal of completing a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in animation.

Discovering a Literary Community

As a young girl growing up in Taiwan, Kimberly loved reading and writing stories about fairies and angels in Chinese. However, when she moved to Canada at age thirteen, she was thrust into an unfamiliar environment. She was isolated from peers, teachers, and people not only by her inability to speak their language, but also by cultural barriers and regional differences.

Nevertheless, Kimberly did not give up. "I want to write an award-winning novel someday, so I had to master English. It's hard, because you don't understand what you're reading

or what people are saying, but when you have the motivation, you strive to be better."

She began devouring books, practicing English with friends, and writing regularly under her tutor's guidance. She jotted down character sketches, ideas, and settings in notebooks, which she later turned into stories.

As her English improved, so did her confidence. Her passion led her to join her high school's creative writing and book clubs, read her poetry at writing anthology launches, attend the Vancouver International Writer's Festival, and share her work on eight different blogs. Her hard work earned her impressive achievements such as top rankings in writing contests and acceptance into an advance placement English Literature course in grade twelve. Her activities also resulted in friendships with immigrants who shared her love of writing and stronger ties with the literary community.

"I think writing has to be the most important aspect of my Canadian life," Kimberly said. Currently, she is an English Major student at the University of British Columbia. She has also joined a student-run newspaper and a Taiwanese culture and literature club on campus. This summer, she is an intern for Ricepaper, an Asian literary magazine, where she is making professional connections and working towards achieving her dream of writing about multiculturalism.

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Lin Wang is the pen name for university student, creative writer, freelance journalist, and hobby photographer, Yilin Wang. She has written four previous articles for CNMag. You can learn more about her at <http://yilinwriter.wordpress.com>.