TRACKING NEWCOMER STORIES IN THE DAYS OF THE PANDEMIC IN MANITOBA

Don Boddy is the Regional Coordinator at the Manitoba Association of Newcomer Serving Organizations.

> "The truth about stories is that is all we are. You can't understand the world without telling a story, there isn't any centre to the world, but a story".
>
> – Thomas King

"I wish I could tell people in Canada to stop. To stop buying everything all the time," said 16-year-old Hanaa. "I have been through this before. In Syria, when the war started, everyone bought everything and only cared about themselves. This does not help. I wish I could tell people to think about and find out how to help eachother. Now is the time to be kind."

Out of the mouths of babes. Hanaa came to Portage la Prairie, Manitoba four years ago with her parents and two siblings through a (BVOR) refugee sponsorship. She was a young girl when the war began in Syria, and a bit older when her family fled to Turkey. Today, Hanaa is in grade 11, works part time, and has friends and family she chats with around the world due to the Syrian diaspora. She shared this wise insight as the COVID 19 pandemic lockdowns were just beginning and people were purchasing and hoarding supplies.

Thankfully, the numbers of those infected with the COVID-19 virus are relatively low in Manitoba, especially in rural communities[1]. However, the impacts of the "lockdown" and restrictions imposed by the Federal and Provincial governments in an effort to "flatten the curve" and keep as many as safe as possible have deeply impacted every Manitoban. For Hanaa, these impacts have meant school now being at home, isolation from friends and limited access to health, government and social services. Even though Hanaa has lived through more difficult days than most, she continues to have a wonderful laugh, and a hopeful and warm presence.

In my role as Regional Coordinator with MANSO (Manitoba Association of Newcomer Serving Organizations), I support organizations that provide settlement services to newcomers in Manitoba. These organizations assist with settlement services (housing, community connections, important documents, employment, etc.), provide official language training, support refugees in their resettlement, and guide their cities, towns and villages towards being welcoming and inclusive. Because I do not work directly with clients, I watch from a distance and I have the sacred honour of being a listener and collector of stories.

During this pandemic, there have been many essential stories of the virus told by governments, in traditional and social media, and in conversations. The spread of the virus and the daily counts of the ill, hospitalizations and deaths, are important to be told. Accounts of lockdowns, mass unemployment, and restrictions should also be documented. However, one cannot wonder if daily counts of resilience, hope, and kindness might be just as vital in getting us through the pandemic. Hanaa's life and her insight about kindness transcend the negativity and are just as important to tell. It is in this spirit, that I will share some rich narratives of newcomer impacts and responses.

1 At the time of the writing of this article, the numbers were low. However, the numbers of positive cases in rural Manitoba have dramatically increased.

Amadi is a settlement worker who lives with his wife and four children in southern Manitoba. Amadi enjoys his work of supporting newcomers who have recently arrived in Canada. He assists those who are on their pathways to permanency in Canada to make a new home here. Almost everything changed with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, except his dedication to his work.

From its early days, Manitoba has welcomed newcomers who came in search of good land and jobs, safety and peace, and the hope of providing something better for their children. Sometimes these early settler days came at great cost to indigenous peoples who were already living here. (Recently, there has been significant work of reconciliation with indigenous peoples.)

In the 21st Century, the Manitoba Provincial Nominee program, government and private refugee sponsorship and resettlement, and other immigration pathways, have meant that Manitoba has been a choice destination for newcomers from all over the world. Resettling in a new country can be hard. Nonetheless newcomers continue to arrive in Manitoba in record numbers.

Since the pandemic began, Amadi's bedroom has become his office and the rest of his small apartment a school for his children. He is no longer able to meet with clients in person, so work is more difficult as online video chats, texts and emails are simply slower. He does his best to support his clients and stay focused on their needs and goals. However, his roles constantly alternate between being settlement worker, teacher, dad and husband. He is passionate about his family and his work and feels the exhaustion caused during these pandemic days. More than his fatigue, he is appreciative that his family is safe and he is able to be there for them and the newcomers he works with.

Amadi and Hanaas' stories are just two of the hundreds I have heard since the pandemic began. I hope that you are in a place where you are able to truly hear some stories of the impacts of the pandemic and newcomer resilience and hope.

Melvin and his family arrived in Russell, Manitoba in the winter of 2020. They were just beginning to call this new community home when the lockdowns meant a loss of employment for mom, school age children having to learn from home with very little English, and quarantining from their new neighbours. However, they did not allow fear and frustration to defeat them, remaining hopeful that their new house would soon be home.

A newcomer from The Pas was transferred to a Winnipeg hospital with stage 4 cancer. His wife was still in the Philippines and travel restrictions meant she could not come. His community in northern Manitoba responded by raising money for the family, relaying their prayers, and settlement workers who went way beyond their job descriptions. While he is still very sick, recently he returned to hospital in The Pas and is now surrounded by friends that have become his pamilya (family).

There are many stories of innovative newcomer entrepreneurs in too many towns to mention, including Brandon, Winkler, Neepawa, and other rural communities whose businesses were deemed essential because of the services or products they supplied. The economic impacts of pandemic have been acutely felt by small business. These business leaders worked to be "COVID-19 compliant" keep their customers and staff safe, and used their creative spirit to adjust services and products.

As I attempt to share these stories in a way that connects and enlightens, in no way am I minimizing the fear and pain that has been part of the pandemic and the government's restrictions. There have been many tears shed and nights filled with anxiety and new tensions in the air. Often, newcomer cultures value the collective community and this was difficult in the COVID-19 context. Published research[2] showed that newcomer students are concerned about the impacts of school shutdown on their future goals. Media accounts of illness and death re-traumatize war-torn newcomers who fled to Canada to escape these horrific experiences.

However, as you read these stories, you can recognize the interwoven threads that are meaningful proof of the importance of immigration beyond work and jobs. Together, all of us make our communities and Canada better. There is fear, yet one can discern the faint whisper of courage. There is loss, yet also less grumbling. There is frustration, but also deep gratitude for all that Canada has been doing to help its people. There is quarantine, yet one can also hear the compassion of community.

Often the cacophony of negative news of loss and illness can drown out the subtlety of soft sweet life giving grace, kindness and courage. These are the stories that go deep inside and give us life. So, I ask you one more time, to have ears that hear and a heart that's open, as I share this last story.

Miguel moved to Canada in 2014, leaving his family in their home country as he pursued their dream of living life in this new land. Eventually, he settled in Dauphin to establish his pathway to permanency in Canada. For more than six years, he had almost daily contact with his family and virtually celebrated birthdays and Christmases. In early 2020, he and his family received their Permanent Residence status in Canada

2 https://acs-aec.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Youth-Survey-Highlights-May-21-2020.pdf

and his family resigned from their employment and made plans to travel to their new home in rural Manitoba in April.

Then the pandemic came upon the world and international travel was shut down. In their country, there was little government support to assist families to get through the pandemic. While the situation seems dark and hopeless, Miguel knows his family will be ok and that someday they will be together on the prairies of Canada.

Friends of Miguel marvel as he shares his gratitude for the steps that the Canadian and Manitoban government have taken to keep everyone safe and support its citizens. While he longs for his family to arrive, he spends days planting red and white flowers because they remind him of Canada, with yellow flowers of hope.