

Andre Goh

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I'm Andre Goh. I was born in Malaysia. I came to Canada in 1979.

On leaving Malaysia

I remember when I left Malaysia, I want to say that it was dark and stormy - it wasn't. It was like woe, weeping, celebration, because literally the whole village came to see us off.

We were teenagers, my older brother and I. I remember we came back from school one day and mom and dad said, "sit down" and I thought uh-oh, something horrible has happened. And my father, in Chinese, said to us, "we're going to leave this place." Oh, we're moving, okay. And then my mom said, "no, we're going to Canada." This is pre-Internet so we had very little idea what Canada was.

When are we going? In two weeks. They kept it a secret until the very end because they figured we don't want to freak you out. In fact, it just made it worse because there was no time to say goodbye to friends, no time to actually process it.

After week one, my brother and I used to put our heads in the freezer because we thought that's how cold it's going to be because we were arriving in January. And if we could survive one minute, we're good. And that was our story when people asked about how to prepare yourself for Canada. I'm sure this is a common immigrant experience, coming from the tropics. It's funny, the things you remember, right?

February 2nd. The temperature was minus 18. Where I came from, the temperature harboured all year round around 30.

Arriving in Toronto

My first memories of Canada was the bus leaving the airport and seeing snow. And it was like how come there's no grass and then, oh that's snow! Snow! Oh! Touch the glass - oh, that's cold. So little things like that totally amazed us.

And then to come into a dingy two bedroom apartment for five people. It was, like, "Eww, we're going to stay here?" That was at Lansdowne and Dupont, which was a working class neighbourhood at the time. And for me, what was nice about the neighbourhood was, because it was working class, there were many immigrants, a lot of Portuguese, a lot of Italian immigrants. Nobody was freaked out that we were there.

Most people were helpful to help us integrate because they knew we were new immigrants. Don't wear those shoes, you need Kodiaks, is what we were told.

Challenges

I tell the story that coming from Malaysia, even though there were different races, I think I was privileged, part of the dominant races. Coming here, going to a school of a thousand kids, being one of two Asian kids, that was freaky. So there was language, there was culture, there was food, and there was just how people interacted with each other. It was challenging.

For me, when people ask me, do you have any friends from high school? I didn't. It was not a nice experience. My goal every day was to never stand out, to blend in with the wall as much as I could, anytime. Because every time I spoke, I knew I was different. If I walked with crowds, people looked at me and I'd be reminded I was different.

So it wasn't nice. The other Asian kid who was in the school, who was at the time called Canadian-born Chinese, the one time he spoke to me, because I looked at him and obviously he could tell I was excited. And he said, "Don't look at me, don't talk to me, don't ever say anything," and he walked away.

Now, I know why he did that; he was protecting himself as well. But I think that was so unfortunate because that would have been my one ally, if at all.

In high school, I just didn't feel like I belonged. There was a lot of self-hatred. I remember for a long time, I just said "I wish I could be white, I wish I could be white, I wish I could be white," because then I'd just blend in. And then in university, suddenly people didn't care that I wasn't white. Kids my age were just like me, just curious, just happy.

Path to Self-Discovery

I think for me, one of the issues around being an immigrant is I learned to always defer to others to speak up first, because I might say something wrong and, you know, I'm not a Canadian. So that was my early experience.

So in university when I was going through the path of self-discovery, thinking that I'm attracted to guys and that I'm gay, and then finding other people who were in the same boat, who are white Canadians and who are now comfortable in who they are, gave me the confidence to be myself.

I remember, it was probably second or third year university, the first time I "outed myself" publically. It was in a public area in the university, there was a table, it was about an LGBT group and I volunteered to sit behind the table with somebody else. I remember my hands were shaking because I thought the worst.

It was uneventful. Nobody looked, nobody said anything, occasionally somebody would say, "do you have any posters?" But that was it. And it was like, oh I guess that I'm gay. So that was funny because it was anticlimactic after all that.

On being Canadian

I remember being in another country where I was asked, “So what does it mean to be Canadian?” and I said, “We listen. We’re genuinely curious about others. We like difference.” And not necessarily because it’s curious but because we just genuinely like to hear stories. And I think that speaks of the Canadian tradition.

We’ve always had stories. We’ve always had immigrants. So for me, this is just an extension of what it is.

Sharing Stories

One of the reasons why I believe in what Passages to Canada does is because I think stories are important. They're our history. It doesn't feel like history now, but long after I'm gone, hopefully my stories and others like mine, will inspire others.

When I think of what Canada is today and what Canada was when I arrived, I think it's important because I believe thirty years from today, Canada will be a different place. I believe it will be more dynamic than what it is. Because I've only seen Canada grow.

One of the things that I also share with other new immigrants is I say, I'm lucky. I moved here as a new immigrant and then I chose to live in another country. And living in another country reminded me how green the grass is in Canada. I couldn't wait to come back.

[End of recorded material]

Andre Goh works as the Manager for the Toronto Police Service's Diversity and Inclusion Office in Toronto.

In 2010, Andre was awarded the City of Toronto's Access, Equity and Human Rights Award for his work with LGBT East and South East Asian newcomers.