

Azim Lila

[Start of recorded material]

[01:00:04:02] My name is Azim Lila. I was born in East Africa, in a small village called Tanga and I arrived in 1989.

On coming to Canada

[01:00:18:20] My family left for several reasons. Picture being nine years old and seeing military helicopters fly above your home. You get a shiver up your spine and that's because we felt that there would be some political instability in the country. My two older sisters were also planning to go to university pretty soon and we knew that the standard of education was not as up to par as we'd like.

[01:00:46:03] So we left for political reasons, we left for educational opportunities, and we also left because we had some family here in Toronto who would receive us and help us adjust.

[01:00:58:01] I felt excited about coming to Canada from what I had watched in the media, from TV, from reading magazines, and I was very young at that point. My honest interpretation of Canadians was that everyone had a Mohawk. I thought of lots of land and space, but that was a nine-year-old's point of view.

First impressions

[01:01:22:08] I started school pretty much within a week, because it was still September, school was about to start for a lot of students. I remember seeing a lot of candy in the classroom and I remember seeing the little jelly worm candies. Our teacher used to give these candies as an incentive if you did your homework. I never had that experience back home.

[01:43:17] One of my first interactions was really through the classroom and through a teacher giving out candy as an incentive, which I now think about as a smart way to get students to study.

[01:01:54:08] But I also remember my sisters having to think very quickly and grow up very quickly in a new country because my parents relied on them to help them with day-to-day communication etc.

On challenges and finding support

[01:02:16:07] I don't think I had many challenges myself. I think my parents are the ones that really had a hard time. My dad, he's an engineer by trade; he's a millwright

engineer. His experience was not being recognized here in Canada. I remember for about two years, he went back home because he couldn't find work here. That left my mom to look after three kids essentially in a new country, and so that was hard.

[01:02:44:08] I think the challenges were more between my parents and them being able to give us the kind of quality of life that they wanted. But they realized that that transferable Canadian experience was really the challenge for them.

[01:02:58:02] I feel that my parents and my siblings overcame the challenges of moving to a new country through their faith. And I remember us being able to go for prayers on weekends and integrating back into our community like we had back home. I think faith, my fiancée calls this faith capital, having an anchor in faith helps you overcome challenges and be resilient to challenges and change.

[01:03:31:05] Some of the key people that played a role in helping us integrate were definitely our first line of family and relatives. The second line I would say of support was our community through faith. And I would say I also received support by having had really good teachers when I first came to Canada. They were my first line of support and then the friendships I built around that.

[01:04:02:09] I think it's just about being very human, being very open to people wanting to get to know you and sharing that. And when you share your story, you listen to other people's stories and that becomes a way to bond with people in your community.

On sharing one's story

[01:04:19:16] I really get excited to share my story because first of all, it makes me realize the importance and value of the journey that my family has gone through to be here, to get to this point. It also makes me recognize that at this point in time in my life, am I doing all that I thought I would do when I first moved to this country.

[01:04:44:00] And it gives you a point in time to reflect on where you're going and where you've been. But more importantly, if I was a new immigrant today, I would want the best advice from an experienced individual. And I think this is also why I try to translate and communicate and share this knowledge that I have to make it easier for other people who are about to start their journey.

[01:05:08:21] In a nutshell, it's about giving back to the community because I have received so much from this community. I remember one time, I was in an affluent area in Toronto where I saw a lot of kids who had a lot of privilege and when I started talking to them about the challenges I went through going through school, I actually started to cry in front of this auditorium.

[01:05:34:18] And at that point in time, I could just see in front of me, certain students who were also like heart to heart could feel what I was going through. I think the message is that if you can touch someone's life through a story and help them become

more aware and sensitive to what other people have experienced, then we're building what my fiancée calls empathy in our community.

[01:06:09:05] We're building people who care about other people and I think that's a tremendously important gift to give to future generations. It's a gift of empathy. It's a gift of being able to recognize that, look, people come from all corners of the world, but we should treat them with respect. We should share our stories so that they can help others that they may know who are new to Canada, and it's like paying it forward.

[01:06:38:20] I remember that moment in the auditorium because I felt at that point I had just given a gift to these individuals who will give that gift to other people.

Advice to newcomers

[01:06:51:15] I think it comes down to three things that I would give in terms of advice. Number one is to celebrate and be open to meeting people. Don't be afraid to talk to people in this country and in your local cities. Be comfortable being who you are and be comfortable sharing who you are, because I think you'll break any perceptions you have or any fears you may have around people and Canadians. I think being open to speaking up is important.

[01:07:29:11] I would also say, in terms of advice, to be an advocate for yourself. I think in this country, it's important to know what you want and be able to articulate that.

[01:07:41:15] And then the third point I would offer to any new Canadian is to recognize the opportunity in this country. Whatever your dream is, I firmly believe that this country will help you get there - if you want to be an astronaut, if you want to be a doctor, if you want to be a leading international scientist, if you want to be a government Prime Minister, if you want to be an executive.

[01:08:04:11] I really believe you have the raw materials to tap into and build up your confidence and your skillset for whatever opportunity you want in this world and in this life. And not forgetting what your dreams are, that is really important because this country can help you get there. **[01:08:25:21]**

[End of recorded material]

Azim has been working with the Royal Bank of Canada since 2011 in Toronto and was selected to join a competitive leadership development program. He also dedicates time to serve in his community, helping kids and youth with special needs.