

Claudia Covalciuc

[Start of recorded material]

Claudia: My name is Claudia Covalciuc. I first immigrated to Canada in December of 1990. I returned to Canada as a Canadian citizen in August of 2006.

Early life

Claudia: My father was never part of my life even before I was born. [01:00:03:18] My mother was a refugee in Baden in Austria. She was originally from Romania and my father was originally from Italy. So I'm half and half. I was born in the refugee camp May 1st, 1990.

The reason my mother was at the refugee camp was she illegally fled Romania after the Romanian revolution in 1989. [01:01:03:00] At the age of six months old, we were forced out of refugee camp and we immigrated to Canada.

A new beginning

Claudia: We arrived in London, Ontario with a garbage bag full of clothes, middle-aged, young mother. That doesn't actually work – young mother. But a middle-aged mother with a young, six month old baby girl. [01:01:32:13] And we didn't have any connections at the time, no money, so that's basically how we arrived here.

I was a student that really enjoyed going to school. I absolutely loved the learning process, formally and informally. So I was always that young child in school that was always interactive with the activities and other students.

[01:01:57:22] Mind you, this came with its own challenges, being an only child with a single mother, an immigrant, low income, poverty stricken family, marginalized. We always had our challenges, especially in school. Ever since I was younger right through until I was finished school in Ontario, I faced bullying on a daily basis.

[01:02:30:02] It's something that I don't regret because I learned from it. I just don't want to see other students have to go through bullying. Ethnicity and being an immigrant definitely had a role to play, being an outsider, not being seen as a real Canadian in their eyes kind of fuelled the bullying.

[01:02:58:00] But from my eyes, I was always so confused because I said, you know, "I'm Canadian just like you are. This is who I am. I grew up here. This is what I know." So there was always that kind of tension between being seen as a foreigner but not seeing myself as one.

So I still kind of get that even today. I really identify myself as a Canadian even though others may not see that all the time.

When Claudia was 11, her mother decided that they would return to her homeland of Romania.

Claudia: [01:03:30:00] We were really being kind of forced out of our community in London, Ontario. It was a community that was growing at a rapid pace, and the economic development was just out of control. We lived in a subsidized apartment building. Management switched over and they were hoping to turn it into university condos because it was more profitable.

[01:03:58:16] As a result, they quadrupled our rent in a span of one month and already being poverty stricken and with minimal income, just enough to get by, there was no way we could financially afford to remain where we were. We didn't have many alternatives, many support networks to kind of find a safe haven within the community.

Returning to Romania

Claudia: [01:04:26:06] I had just turned 11 years old, so I was still very much a child. I had never really left the country before then, so to me, it was a new experience. The pretences surrounding our departure, I sort of knew what was going on, but my mother didn't really tell me the whole situation. She didn't tell me that we basically left with no money and we had a one way ticket.

So my initial reaction was excitement: "Oh I get to experience my culture. This is where my mother is from. [01:05:00:12] This is going to be amazing. I'm going to have a fabulous summer." But reality soon set in after we arrived that this wasn't the case.

Claudia and her mother arrived in Romania with no money or family support.

Claudia: There was also like a huge culture shock for me because growing up in Canada as a Canadian, I didn't really see myself as an immigrant. I didn't see myself as a refugee. I really identified with that. [01:05:30:21] And going to Romania was just like whoa, I had to take a step back and think, "Oh my goodness." Even just the language and the culture and the community and how everyday life was so different than what I was used to.

In that following fall, I was registered in a local school, and they refused to acknowledge my Canadian credentials. They actually wanted me to repeat grade five even though I had passed with flying colours. [01:06:02:03] They basically didn't see the Canadian system as equivalent to theirs. So they said, "Okay, well we'll put you into grade five."

Basically there were no resources for me. There was a huge language barrier and obviously a level barrier because whatever they were doing in math and sciences, geography, was completely different than what we were learning in our Canadian system. [01:06:29:05]

I was discriminated against and bullied heavily in the first three months. I was in and out of six different local schools in a span of three months. After the three months, my mother pulled me out of the last school and she said, "That's it. You're not going to school here in Romania ever again. The next time you'll be going to school will hopefully be back in Canada."

So after I realized that I wouldn't be in school, it was probably in November of 2001. [01:07:03:09] So I was still 11 years old and I realized that I'm not going to school, we have no income coming in, my mother is unable to look after me. There's a huge problem here. Something needs to happen.

So basically, I was an entrepreneur in my own sense and I started a small business within the flea market setting. [01:07:31:03] It was rough at first. Obviously I still had the language barrier. I couldn't really speak Romanian and people didn't really know a lot of English.

So there was a huge barrier. Also, people saw me as a foreigner, a young, foreign girl. There was always that fear of exploitation. I've encountered a couple of different, unique situations where it could have turned out really bad for me. [01:08:01:02]

While supporting herself and her mother, Claudia worked diligently to return to Canada. She encountered significant challenges appealing to various agencies and obtaining a passport.

Claudia: I was not in school. I had no legal guardian looking after me, no income, no stable residence. I'm a child in need, do something, help me in some way. It almost made me re-evaluate: am I a real Canadian or am I something else?

[01:08:28:22] These were questions running through my head. Obviously, I do identify as Canadian and I love being Canadian. But with that, there comes challenges and room for improvement. So we need to realize that our government's not perfect. Our society, Canadian society isn't perfect either. So we just need to work and acknowledge those imperfections.

Returning to Canada

After saving enough money for a one-way ticket to Canada, Claudia traveled for 48 hours and arrived in Halifax late at night in August 2006.

Claudia: [01:09:02:03] When I arrived at the airport, I basically had no supports. I had nobody there waiting for me, no family to look after me, no community agency or resource that was there. I was a young, naïve 16 year old girl that had gone through extreme hardships. Here I was almost reliving my mother's experience 16 years earlier, arriving at the airport with a bag of clothes and basically that was it, an expired passport. [01:09:35:00] That's all I had.

So I was at the airport, the Halifax International Airport for a couple of hours and it was really late at night. Our flight arrived at 11:30 p.m. So I was there for most of the night. I was above and beyond exhausted. But before being exhausted, I was extremely nervous thinking, "Okay well what's going to happen to me now, you know. [01:10:01:19] I'm a 16 year old girl who just came back to Canada. I don't know anybody. I don't have a home. I don't have a base. What's going to happen?"

I was absolutely terrified. But at the same time, I thought, "Okay, you can do this. You'll find a way. You've always found a way to get to where you want to go. Just keep going."

I had a local Aboriginal woman sit next to me. She looked at me [01:10:30:04] and she realized that, you know, there was something wrong. And she's like, "Okay, well what's wrong? What happened?" I told her a little bit of my life story. I said I was out of school for five years, just come back to Canada. I have no support, no resources. I don't know what's going to happen to me.

So she said, "You'll be okay and we'll find a way." She sat there for a couple of minutes and she gave it some thought. [01:11:00:17] And she ultimately said, "Okay, you're coming home with us. That's that."

Claudia joined the woman and her family on Eskasoni First Nation in Cape Breton, NS, and was adopted by the local Aboriginal community.

A new life

Claudia: At first, when I arrived, they weren't quite sure what to do with me because here I was, this young 16 year old girl with no family, had been out of school for five years, no income – just kind of dropped out of the sky. [01:11:35:01] A lot of people were kind of confused and thought, "Well what do we do with her now that she's here?"

My big push was to return to school. That was my fundamental drive, even when I was in Romania. I just thought, "Okay, I need to return to school and get somewhere with my life," because that's what I wanted to do. [01:11:57:23]

Claudia enrolled in a Nova Scotia high school and excelled as an honours student.

Claudia: School presented its own challenges because I was working full time at a local restaurant every day after school. I also had to hitchhike to go to school. Some people might laugh at this part and think, “Why is she hitchhiking?” [01:12:30:00] But I left the community school to go to a school in the city which was further away because they had more courses available and more resources and such, hence the problem of being too far away and the buses wouldn’t come out this far.

So on top of everything that I went through, I had to hitchhike to go to school every day. And I had to hitchhike back home in time to go to work. [01:13:00:12] So my life as a 16, 17, 18 year old Canadian girl was definitely a lot different than what most experienced.

But I really appreciate all the hardships that I’ve gone through. To me, they’ve really built who I am as a person and, you know, I feel privileged to be able to share my experience and say I’ve overcome such hardships. [01:13:30:16] Other people can too. And I’m grateful.

A new identity

Claudia: My Canadian identity has definitely shifted over the years. [01:13:58:17] When I was younger, I identified as Canadian just because I was Canadian. I didn’t really give it much thought. Through my teens, I started to question my Canadian identity, thinking: is this really who I am?

When I returned to Canada in my late teens and early 20s, I really kind of redefined who I was as a Canadian and I definitely made it more concrete that yes, I am a Canadian. More importantly, I identify with the Aboriginal communities. [01:14:33:23] That’s my primary focus. They will always be my family. My roots are definitely embedded within the communities, within the culture, within the tradition.

I’m very spiritual. I follow the practices from sweat lodges to ceremonies to drumming. I drum with an Aboriginal women’s drum group, [01:14:59:18] even traveling in the summer to all the mawiomis and the gatherings. It’s definitely a passion and definitely who I am now as a person. I’m very honoured to be a part of the culture and any little bit that I can do to help give back to what they’ve given me is always a priority.

Claudia graduated from high school and is now attending Saint Mary’s University in Halifax.

She is completing her Bachelor of Arts in criminology and sociology and Honours in Aboriginal Governance. She hopes to attend law school.

[01:15:25:00] [Claudia drumming/singing]

[End of recorded material]