

Eunice Abaga

[Start of recorded material]

Eunice: Hello, my name is Eunice Abaga. I was born in Kenya, East Africa. And I arrived in Canada in 2000, January 19th in the middle of winter.

On leaving Kenya

Eunice: When I was growing up, my parents could not afford to educate me beyond 8th grade which is standard there, [01:00:31:05] partly because it was very expensive to pay tuition for secondary school, and like Canada, where a secondary education is free, it is not free in Kenya. So when even my parents were not able to educate me, I got help from relatives and friends. And I was able to finish secondary school and go into university.

After I graduated from university with my Bachelor of Education, it was the 90s when most African countries were going through what they call program adjustment, structural adjustment programs. [01:01:10:04] They were so hard. People were losing jobs. There was no money for hiring teachers, hiring people in the healthcare system. So I had no job after my graduation. And I thought I should pursue education. And I really thought of Canada as a place to pursue my education and hopefully have an opportunity for a better future. [01:01:33:18] That's why I came to Canada.

Arriving in Canada

It was hard because I had to leave my family behind. I come from a big family and to have to leave my parents behind, my brother and my cousins was very hard. And going to a foreign country where I didn't know anyone and thinking about all the differences was very complex. [01:02:00:14] But I took a chance and I'm glad I did.

Challenges

Eunice: I had difficulty adjusting to a few things like in the shop. You go to a shop and things are labelled by the pound. I was used to kilograms. And the tax is not included in the price, or little adjustments like that, just coping in the market, coping in the classroom because sometimes people find it hard to work in teams because they don't know you. [01:02:39:03] And they try to avoid you, naturally people like bundling up with people they know. So because you are from away and they don't know you, it was very difficult to get a working team in the classroom.

When I graduated, I was not able to find a job in my field of study. [01:03:00:20] So I did a Master's in public administration. I was not able to get a job immediately. So I had to do other jobs to just keep going. And I was even forced to go back to school and do two extra years to be

able to get my license to teach, because my license from Kenya was not valid in Canada. So those are the kinds of adjustments I made to get a job. **[01:03:29:10]**

On discrimination

Eunice: It is my role as an individual to try to eliminate discrimination, increasing awareness of difference as not being a bad thing. So that's what I would rather focus on than the experience itself. I have decided to actually do research around ethnicity, race and gender. **[01:03:58:22]** When people look at you being different because you're from a different gender or a different race or a different ethnicity and exclude you, it's not a good thing. My work and my research in my workplace, I try as much as possible to focus on differences not being a bad thing.

We need to look at difference, we need to look at similarities as well and teach people that we've come a long way as a country or as a global village. **[01:04:31:04]** The days that people had explicit discrimination is gone. And now it is a different age where we need to understand how the differences can be used for the good of the public. That is what I would rather focus on.

Where you from?

Eunice: **[01:04:58:08]** Usually when people ask where you're from, the intention is to try and locate you geographically so that they can know how to relate with you. And partly, I think it's because of the traditional way that the research and the literature around cultures has been going on where people assume you are from a certain geographical region, you will behave in a certain way. And then they can predict your participation or the way you do things. **[01:05:31:22]** But that is not relevant anymore because we live in a global village. People may be born in a different place, grow up in a different place and live in a different place.

So it is a genuine question, a question of curiosity. But it has implicit meaning. And what I'm trying to do instead of just being upset by the question, thinking they're asking the question because they want to discriminate me, I want to engage people in that conversation about geographical local and cultural values. **[01:06:10:05]**

In my thinking, I think if we ask that question in a very friendly way as well as be open minded or share with the other person why you are asking that question, then it's not as bad as trying to label you as if you're from another world. **[01:06:33:02]** You are the other, and they want to exclude you based on that. If I feel like you're asking that question to exclude me, then I will feel uncomfortable answering it.

A word of advice

Eunice: The advice I would give to newcomers to Canada is to know that this is a very big country, of different people from different places who arrived at different times. [01:07:02:20] A country that embraces multiculturalism, meaning we value and respect other people's culture as well as share stories about different cultural perspectives. It's a country where we ensure that people don't go hungry. We support other people.

[01:07:32:07] Volunteerism is one of the values that Canadians embrace. People volunteer to help others and so allowing other people to see themselves as part of the nation, being inclusive, so we may be different in colour, we may be different in gender; we may be different in different cultural perspectives. [01:08:04:04] But living together and being open minded is very important to growing as a nation.

Be open- minded. Be welcoming. Embrace other cultures and values and respect other people as people first before you even look at the colours.

[End of recorded material]

Through her work as a policy analyst with Nova Scotia's Department of Health and Wellness, Eunice advocates for community health and well-being. She is multilingual, proficient in Ekegusii, Kiswahili and English.