

Léonie Tchatat

My name is Léonie Tchatat. I am from Cameroon and I arrived in Canada in 1990.

Leaving Cameroon

I left Cameroon at the request of my parents who wanted me to pursue my education in Canada. Apart from that, my older sister was living in Toronto, which made it a lot easier for my parents to allow me to come to Canada. When I arrived in Canada, it was a very difficult adjustment for me in the beginning, but it got better and became a positive experience later on. The experience I gained throughout this difficult process helped me become who I am today. It was hard because when I arrived, my relationship with my older sister was not exactly perfect. So it was very, very hard for me. My integration at school was not easy. We were many students who came from developing countries, there was culture shock, a new school system to figure out, the entire integration process, winter, and missing our families back home. All in all, it was a fairly complicated process in the beginning.

Refugee Status

I arrived as a student. It was difficult, my relationship with my sister, integration at school. After that, I had to change my status because my parents' political situation, who were involved with the opposition movement, had completely changed. I had to apply for refugee status, which really had quite an impact on my integration process here as well.

It was very trying because at one point, I no longer had any money to support myself. I had to find the means to continue my schooling. I was worried about life, my parents, at one point I had lost contact with my father. It was a very hard time and, on top of that, I was not really getting much support from my sister. I had to find the means to keep persevering. I was not alone in this; I also had friends from Somalia for example or other countries who came here as refugees. We had to nurture one another, I had to organize meetings, activities, to support each other and keep going. When you are new and you do not know or fully understand the refugee status process, it is very hard. Why is it so difficult? Because you have to find a lawyer, you have to go before a jury, you have to explain your story and very often it is a story you do not want to remember because it is very painful. The reality is that until you receive your status, you cannot start university because you do not have the means or the legal status to register for classes, you have to wait until you are accepted. So all of this is a major challenge, you have to live on social assistance, which is not exactly a source of pride, especially when you come from a family where there is a certain shame associated with it. My childhood in Cameroon had been fairly easy since I had everything I needed to grow up. It was once I arrived here and I went through those hard times that I learned to grow up.

Overcoming Challenges

I am very perseverant by nature and I have been this way since I was a child. When I want something, I work to get it. Secondly, I had to find ways to not dwell on the problem. I wanted to be encouraged to continue moving forward. I found information on my community, I discovered there were services in French and there were organizations that existed. A few years later, I understood that by volunteering, it was a way to learn about yourself and live a Canadian experience.

In 1993, Léonie founded La Passerelle [The Gateway], an organization that helps meet the integration and economic development needs of young Francophones from all different backgrounds.

The organization or movement that I have created continues to grow. We have even managed to secure our first grant to help us organize. I have met people who are today my mentors, who have counselled me. I believe it was having an open mind, and a willingness to grow out of the situation I was in, that helped me a great deal along the way. I had a friend who for a time welcomed me into her home. Her parents were like my parents and they supported me a lot. So I did have this family love and parental supervision that helped me along the way. All of this helped me overcome my challenges.

Building an Identity

At first, you do not really know where you stand. When you arrive, you come with an identity. I was Cameroonian, I was here to go to school, but I really did not fully comprehend the process of integration. My journey has allowed me to get to a place where I now feel completely like a Franco-Ontarian. I am the mother of two little boys. They are to live in this pluralistic Francophonie. So I have to make sure that they have a sense of belonging as Canadians, but also as Franco-Ontarians and as Africans. I do not think that I can dismiss my African culture because that is who I am, those are my values. It is what is innate in me, but Franco-Ontarian culture is the perfect complement to my African culture.

Canadian Citizenship

The day I received my Canadian citizenship, I watched as people around me cried. It was a beautiful, moving ceremony.

There were many immigrants who received their citizenship that day. For me, it was like... I should have had it already! I say this because I always felt like a Canadian even without having the official papers. I always did what was required without having them. For me, becoming a Canadian citizen was the culmination of everything I had done. The only difference between Canadian citizenship and my status was the inability to vote. But

apart from that, I was very involved. I was committed. And I did not become lost in the fray because I was not a Canadian citizen. I think when you arrive as an immigrant, a refugee or a student, you have to get involved right from the beginning, or you have to adopt the country as your own and try to function as though you are there to live the rest of your life. This is what enabled me to say to myself that day: “Ah finally, I've earned it. Here it is, it's mine.”

Sharing Your Story

We need to share our immigration stories because this is the only way new immigrants can learn and understand the process. Even when they are going through a hard time, through such stories, they can see that there are models for success. New immigrants can make use of these success stories to help them understand that they are not alone in what they are going through and that other people have gone through it, too. But through perseverance, a willingness to succeed, to integrate and live fully in Canada, it is possible and that is why we need to share these stories, not only in Canada, but even before immigrants arrive. This way they will understand they are coming to a country that will welcome them, that it is a land of opportunity and here they have the right to raise a family, work and live as part of a community, to grow and share the values of Canadian citizenship.

Léonie has been the founder and executive director of La Passerelle-IDÉ for nearly 20 years. She is recognized in the francophone community for her leadership and volunteer work in French-speaking Ontario.