

Nikki Jafari

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Nikki Jafari: My name is Nikki Jafari. I'm from Iran and I came to Canada in 1990.

Nikki's family left Iran during the Iranian Revolution when Nikki was 2 years old. They first immigrated to Turkey before coming to Canada.

On moving to Canada

Nikki Jafari: When I moved to Canada, I was 10 years old. [01:28:00:03] It was a much harsher reality for me because we definitely didn't speak any English. We just knew kind of hello and how are you and that was pretty much the extent of our English.

Turkish culture was much more similar to Iranian culture, whereas Canadian culture was quite a bit different. So, the first day of school here was even more terrifying than the first day of school in Turkey. I didn't speak any English. [01:01:00:01] One good thing about it was there was a lot more multiculturalism. In that sense, it wasn't that scary, and there were a lot of people in school that were also different. That definitely helped.

I remember my first day in class, my classmates making jokes or talking and I couldn't understand what they were saying. If I wanted to express myself, I couldn't say anything. It's really weird when you know what you want to say, but you just don't know how to say it. [01:01:29:13] You're in a room with people and you can't understand a word that they're saying to you. It is definitely a terrifying experience. It wasn't the easiest first year when I was in Canada. I did experience a bit of racism or bullying and different things.

But once I started learning the language and blending in, things got easier.

Between two cultures

Nikki Jafari: Finding the balance between two cultures is always the hardest because you still want to keep some connection to your roots. Your family always insists that you still are connected to your roots and you still behave in certain cultural senses that connect you to your roots. [01:02:08:16]

But at the same time, you go to school and your classmates and your friends and your peers are a little bit different than your family's expectations. So there's always that juggling act in the beginning to find that balance and find yourself and find out how you can keep the best of both cultures and find yourself within the both and kind of know how to present yourself.

[01:02:27:00] Eventually, having other immigrants as friends and finding out from their experiences how they've coped with it, you kind of use each other as a support system. I think Canada, one of the most beautiful things about it, is how diverse it is. I grew up in Toronto before coming over to Halifax, and in Canada, you can just kind of travel in – Toronto, you can travel the street and travel the world within just that hour of you just going from one side of the street to the other.

In school, we had friends from every culture. [01:02:57:16] So you kind of experience different food, cultures and diversity. People could be who they are and still be Canadian at the same time. So there's a sense of belonging that you don't have to choose between your past and your future. You can find a happy medium that you can kind of have the best of both worlds.

On challenges and adaptation

Nikki Jafari: When we came to Canada, my mom was a single parent with four kids. We were 8, 9, 10 and 11 years old. [01:03:28:03] She didn't really have any assets and she didn't speak any English, so when she came here, there were a lot of really nice people who helped us along the way. There were a lot of people who went out of their way to help us make Canada our home and feel connected to the community here.

I will never ever forget those people. I can still picture their faces. I can still remember one of them took me to Subway for the first time. I remember that experience. You can never go back and make a difference in those people's lives. But if you remember and stay connected to those memories, you can change the future for other people's lives. [01:04:01:12]

So one of the reasons I work so closely with the immigrant communities here in Halifax is I can totally see in their eyes the same panic that was in my mom's eyes or my own eyes. I feel like if I help those people have the same experience that I did, then tomorrow, those people will go and help someone else and can have a pay it forward mentality.

Sometimes people underestimate the stress an immigrant can go through [01:04:27:15] from basic things such as finding your favourite restaurant, to your hairdresser, to your accountant, to a new language, a new culture, a new way of doing business, a new way of earning money. Everything you've learned and built your whole life is gone and you start from scratch, from nothing.

For example if you're a new immigrant, you need to learn how to network here in Canada, how to start a business, – even basic networking skills, basic common sense things that we take for granted; body language, eye contact, these are all things that seem so basic to us. If you're not from here, you could have a totally different culture.

Something that would be very disrespectful in our culture here, it could be kind of the opposite over there. [01:05:13:23] For example, in some cultures, if you make eye contact with somebody, it's considered really rude.

On celebrating cultures

Nikki Jafari: People always make fun of me in the sense that they say I'm a very multicultural person. I kind of celebrate all occasions. Just a few weeks ago, the Indian community here had a gathering. [01:05:28:20] I wore a sari and went out to the function. Because I grew up in Turkey, I feel very connected to the Turkish community here. So I'm always attending all their events and functions. We're doing a fundraiser for them this weekend and I'm going to be emceeding the event. I'm very connected to the Iranian culture and I attend so many of their events and festivities. I'm very involved with the community. At the same time, I'm very involved with the Haligonian community. We do tons of fundraising events and trade shows and business events.

[01:05:57:17] I don't think you have to have a label and say, "This is my culture." They say home is where the heart is, and as long as you're connected to whatever you love, it can all be a part of who you are. You can blend it all. It doesn't even have to be countries that necessarily that you've been to or you have an association to. I've never been to Tibet but I feel very connected to Buddhism and that culture and that philosophy as a whole. If you come to my apartment, you will see a lot of traces of that.

I think in this day and age, the whole world has become so much smaller. [01:06:31:14] You can connect to so much that you don't have to have experience firsthand.

On identity and home

Nikki Jafari: People ask me all the time like, "What do you consider yourself? Where do you consider you're from?" I was born in Iran. My parents are Iranian, so I definitely consider myself Iranian. But I grew up in Turkey and all my childhood memories are from Turkey. It always feels like home. But I've been in Canada since I was 10 years old, so that's home. [01:6:58:18] I grew up in Toronto so I consider Toronto home.

But I lived most of my adult life in Halifax, so I consider that home. So I find if I'm in Toronto, I refer to Halifax as home. If I'm in Halifax, I refer to Toronto as home – and I think I really believe in what I said earlier, home is where the heart is. You can be connected to so many places and feel like it's home. I don't think we need to be divided by borders and titles and countries. You could blend all of it together to find out who you are. [01:07:30:18]

Through my profession I meet all kinds of people from all walks of life. I think back in the day, when you would meet somebody, most people

were born and raised more or less in the same town. They would have one or two careers at the most. Most times, even generations would have dealt with, for example, the same bank or the same doctor or the same lawyer.

But nowadays, the world is just so global. [01:07:57:10] Most people have various career changes through their life. They're born in one place. They're raised in another place. They've done a lot of traveling. They've seen the world. So we as people have become a lot more complex and diverse.

For the most part, we're all becoming global. We're all becoming more world traveled, more experienced and more open to experiencing different cultures. I think at the end of it all we're going to hopefully one day get around these titles and these borders and having to fit people into these boxes to see: where do they belong? [01:08:31:22] Then we could just get to know people as who they are and appreciate them for who they are as opposed to finding a title to kind of put them in this nice little neat box.

[End of recorded material]

Nikki works as a Mortgage Broker with RBC, in Halifax, NS. She is a founder of the Iranian Business Trade Show.