

Timmins celebrates unique diversity



By Benjamin Aubé
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Young Sidd Jha takes a few practice swings during a cricket game at Fred Salvador Field, the highlight of Diversity Day in Timmins. The day was organized by the Timmins Local Immigration Partnership and the Timmins and District Multicultural Centre, who took the opportunity to provide updates about ongoing efforts to welcome newcomers to the community.

TIMMINS - Though it's probably never happened in Timmins before, it was almost natural to see a full-blown cricket match unfolding on Fred Salvador Field under a clear, sun-drenched sky.

A visiting squad from North Bay took on a team of local cricketers, largely from Timmins' Indian and Pakistani communities. There was a simple charm about watching grown men transformed into boys, playing the game they love so much.

But organizers of the event, which was the highlight of Diversity Day in the city, explained there is much work being done behind the scenes as well to ensure the city's newest residents feel as at home as can be.

As part of the city's long-term projects, the city has been focusing on immigration through various focus groups, studies and volunteer-driven committees. The Timmins Local Immigration Partnership have been among the leaders throughout the process, which includes a number of phases, explained TLIP co-ordinator John Okonmah.

"It's going very well," he said. "We're in the fourth phase right now. That should run from April until March next year. It's still about following on the 18 recommendations which came through from the earlier phase, which involved pooling stakeholders in the community together and finding out which issues came out of that.

"One of the recommendations was to establish the Multicultural Centre, which is up and running, and also to set up a subcommittee for new immigrants. We've got an employer counsel, which looks at the job-related side of newcomers coming to the community, how best to make them job-ready and get them engaged in the labour market, and we've also got a Welcoming Subcommittee to enable newcomers to feel welcome in our community.

"There were some other big issues that came through in the 18 recommendations. Housing was a big issue. There's nothing we can do about that, so that's gone to the appropriate quarters and they're working on that."

It's been well-documented how the Porcupine Camp was essentially built by a melting pot of immigrant families, most of whom moved to Northern Ontario in search of stable work in the mines, and in the end, a better life.

Quickly though, cultural differences were blurred and a proud identity unique to Timmins and its residents was forged. Today, that identity is still strong.

As Timmins and District Multicultural Centre outreach intern Jennifer Vachon explained, part of that identity remains welcoming newcomers to the city with open arms. Indeed, most of the people immigrating to Timmins today are doing so for much of the same reasons as those who came before them more than a century ago.

The local Multicultural Centre opened nearly two years ago to help those families with the difficult process of settling into a new city, country and home.

"A lot has changed since the Centre first opened," said Vachon. "We're super busy – there's only two of us in the centre and it's been crazy. Lots of newcomers have been coming to get our help with immigration-related stuff, helping finding employment, finding housing, putting on events to help people socialize and meet new people and settle in.

"Another big thing we do is helping with government forms; applying for citizenship, permanent residency, stuff like that."