

Najia: This Is What Family Means

Najia Elacel is the Community Kitchen Leader and Liaison Cultural Outreach Presenter at Collingwood Neighbourhood House. She told her story on December 22nd, 2014. She began by explaining how she ended up living one block away from the neighbourhood house, “Around eight years ago I was going through a hard time – I had to move because I was in an abusive relationship. It was so difficult to find a good and safe place for a single mother with two kids. Luckily I met a lady who was the president of a co-op and she helped me to move in. Even though I’d lived in Canada for nine years by then, I didn’t know what a co-op was. We don’t have such a thing where I come from in Morocco. I think I was meant to be in that co-op; it came at a time when everything was really bad. But I believe that the best comes from the worst, so when it gets really, really bad, then something beautiful will come out of it – and that’s what happened.”

She continued, “When I moved into the co-op, they told me, ‘You need to start volunteering.’ ‘Okay! What does volunteering mean?’ Because where I come from, volunteering is something we just do. Nobody says, ‘I’m going to volunteer;’ but just, ‘I’m going to do this.’ Right away I got involved in many things: I became chair of the family committee, I was on the board, I helped with landscaping, I threw parties – it was amazing. I’ve organized the Christmas party for the past eight years. It doesn’t matter that I’m Muslim because I feel like it shouldn’t be about the religion - if there is a beautiful thing that brings people together and makes them happy and makes them share their feelings, then that is good. I don’t have my family here, so my friends and the people that I am close to give me that sense of family. For me, ‘family’ is when everybody gets together, enjoys the moment and laughs, the kids are happy, everybody’s happy, there’s great food. When I see all that, it gives me warmth and I think, ‘This is what family means.’ We don’t have to be related by blood for me to call you my family. No. It’s what we create together that gives the meaning to that word.”

Najia described how she became connected with Collingwood Neighbourhood House, “It’s a beautiful story. When I moved into the co-op, I didn’t have money and I didn’t have a job, so it was a difficult time for me. I did not qualify for social assistance because when I was working I had put money into RESPs, so they said I couldn’t have anything. In the meantime, I was busy at the co-op doing all these activities. At the co-op, there was a lady who used to come to Collingwood. One day she told me, ‘Why don’t you go to this place because there’s a program where you can get free food once a week.’ I was like, ‘Free food? For sure, I’ll take my kids.’ She brought me to Collingwood to a program for single mothers and low-income people with their children. They have a free dinner and the kids do some activities. I started coming every week, but I’m not the kind of person that eats and runs; I need to do something, so I began helping by washing dishes and cleaning the kitchen after the meal.”

For the next three months, Najia attended the program with her kids. She was still looking for work, sending out résumés without success. One day she was tired of looking for work and decided to go to the neighbourhood house to see if there was anything she could help with. She walked into the kitchen at one o’clock and found a disaster. She related, “The lady who was in charge of the program that day was yelling, ‘Oh my god! What am I going to do?’ She me, ‘The lady who was supposed to cook the Christmas dinner called in sick and there’s eighty people coming at six o’clock! What are we going to do?’ I looked at her and said, ‘I can cook the dinner.’ ‘You? Are you sure? Do you know how?’ ‘No problem, don’t worry about it.’ Then she told me, ‘Okay, here’s the potatoes. Here’s the meat. Here is this. Here are two guys to help you. I have to go.’ And she left. I’m thinking, ‘What? She has to go? I don’t know where things are and what is what. Why did I say to this woman that I can do this?’ Then I told myself, ‘No, I can do this!’ I started opening the cupboards and drawers to see what I could use.

Najia continued, "Somehow, by five o'clock when the woman came back, I was able to tell her, 'The stuff is in the oven. This is here. This is here. This is what you need to do.' I had to go pick up my kids. By the time we returned, they had already served the dinner. When I walked in the door holding the hands of my twin boys, something amazing happened. The lady in charge of the program said, 'Hey everyone, this is the lady who saved Christmas!' I was like, what? 'This is the lady who cooked the dinner for you guys.' I looked around and saw about eighty people sitting with their kids. Everybody stood up and clapped and said, 'This is the most amazing food we have ever had.' I was like, 'Oh my god! Seriously?' When I came to Canada, I had problems from the first day I came. I went through abuse - physical abuse, mental abuse, everything. I had been told so many times that I was nothing, that I was worthless. At that moment those people changed my life. Everybody stood up for me. I realized, 'Oh my gosh, I'm not what that person told me I was. Now I'm back to me!' It took just that moment to give me 'me' back. They gave me the courage to believe in myself. I was myself from that time and I've never left that program."

For the next year, Najia volunteered whenever she could, but what she really wanted was to work at the neighbourhood house. Eventually she got a job elsewhere and wasn't able to attend neighbourhood house programs as often, but remained active in her co-op. At one point the seniors program at Collingwood needed a leader and a senior who lives in the co-op suggested Najia. The coordinator invited her for an interview, but Najia didn't get the job. Sometime later the neighbourhood house needed to hire a cook. Once again, neighbourhood house staff took Najia's resume but didn't offer her the job. At that time, Najia wasn't working, so when they invited her to volunteer, she agreed. Najia explained what happened next, "I volunteered in the kitchen and I was working with Mr. Ho. He would tell me what to do and I would show him a better, quicker way of doing it. He always trusted me and said, 'Okay go, go for it.' Everything worked very well for a couple of weeks. Then one time the program leader came in and said, 'Oh, Mr. Ho, thank you. That was so great. Did you cook that?' Mr. Ho pointed at me and told her, 'No! She did. She did everything!'" When they again needed to hire somebody, the kitchen program coordinator took Najia's resume and discussed it with the coordinator of the family brunch program. Najia related their conversation: 'I have a resume from a lady who says she's volunteered here, but I'm not sure about her.' 'Is it the lady with twins?' 'Yes.' 'Oh! Hire her! I'll tell you what she did! She saved Christmas! She saved me!'" Najia continued, "So, finally I got a job at the neighbourhood house! I was happy that they saw me as an asset instead of focusing on my resume, which does not tell the whole story about a person. That was five years ago."

Since then, Najia has worked with several different programs, including seniors and family programs. She related, "When I started my program with the seniors, we had around twenty people; now I get about sixty people for lunch twice a week - they called their friends to come because they really enjoy the food and the atmosphere. I just love them. Working with the seniors makes me feel like I'm not my age. They bring joy to my life because they help me see life from a different perspective; our seniors carry valuable wisdom within them. I always encourage my kids - they're twelve years old now - to come and help the seniors and talk, so they also feel that they are part of something and can contribute. The neighbourhood house Christmas party is also amazing - this year we had 176 people, including 120 seniors. It was the best! I said, 'How about we make the goal for next year 200?' The other staff were looking at me like, 'Are you sure you can cook for that number?' 'Of course I can. No problem.' Where I come from, what can feed one, can feed two."

Najia described one of the changes that she initiated at the neighbourhood house, "I took the seniors program to the community. Staff were always coming into the kitchen saying, 'Oh my goodness, did you make that? It smells so good! Can I buy this?' The program coordinator always told them, 'Sorry it's only

for seniors.’ That made no sense to me. We’re always looking for funders to support these seniors, and then you’ve got staff asking to buy things, and you tell them no? They said, ‘The program is for seniors so we’re only supposed to serve seniors.’ I had an idea, ‘Why don’t we call it community lunch instead of seniors’ lunch?’ And we did it! We opened it up so that now children and other people are welcome to walk in. I don’t really like separate groups - like seniors, children, moms - because they’re all connected. If you look at a family, you see a grandmother and then you see a mother and then you see a child.” She added, “Through these changes, the kitchen became the place where everybody meets and where people come to talk about their problems. I love solving problems! If there’s no problems, there’s no skills to learn. And I always come up with something. I don’t know if that’s a gift that God gave me but I always like to help and be involved with people.”

Najia reflected on how her personality and cultural background affect her work, “I’ve always been a very social person. I have lots of energy. I don’t know why I’m like that. I have this thing in me: I just love people. To me, love is the most powerful thing that can really connect people with each other. Sometimes I find that people can get busy with life and caught up with other things and it’s like ‘me, me, me,’ and ‘my family.’ I think when we start thinking like that, we lose a most precious thing. When you look at all families equally, whether it is your family or somebody else’s family, then it doesn’t matter if it’s my son or my friend’s son or if it’s my sister or if it’s my friend. I just look at everybody the same. Then you feel like, ‘Okay, these are all my family, these are all my people.’ When I go to the community, every single girl there is my sister, and every single man there is my brother. So when I reach out to someone I don’t say, ‘Hey, Mr. Jas,’ I say, ‘Hey brother,’ or ‘Hey sister.’ I don’t need to know your name - I just call you sister or brother, and that creates a family relationship immediately. When somebody reaches out to you saying, ‘Sister, can you help me with this,’ it hits you, like, ‘Oh, somebody thinks I’m his sister? Of course I’ll help you!’ Sometimes it helps to reach out to people just by using those words.”

She explained that it was her mother who taught her to be humble and to always try to see what she can learn from other people, “My mom had a hard life. Her mother passed away when she was two years old. Her father was married to two women and the other woman didn’t accept her. When she was twelve years old, they made her marry a man who was eighty years old. She had a kid with him, then he died. As a woman with a child, a widow, where is she going to go? So her brother had to take care of her and he was a very religious person, so she wasn’t allowed to go out, or even look from the window. This was in the 1960s. Somehow she met my dad and they got married. She’s not educated; she doesn’t know how to read or write. My dad was an engineer. He and his family treated her very badly and she ended up raising eight kids on her own. A few times she gave birth alone and just cleaned herself up and kept working. She gave her whole life to her children. Her story makes me very humble. She put something into me to make me always want to make a difference in people’s lives.”

Najia recalled a proud moment that occurred with one her volunteers, “This volunteer started with us when he was sixteen, and I love him dearly. I’m so proud of him and I can see a big future for him. Now he works here. When he started with Collingwood he wouldn’t speak, but slowly we got to him. I believe that change will come from within the person and I try to connect with people by saying, ‘You need to connect with yourself.’ At the neighbourhood house, we connect and create possibilities for that to happen. He and I often talk. One Christmas, he brought me a flower and a card. He read the card for me and I will never forget what he said. He told me, ‘Thank you so much for all you’ve done for me. You taught me the things that my mom could not teach me, that I did not learn at school: your charity, your giving to people. The things you do for people have opened my eyes to the things I would never have learnt anywhere else. I appreciate you so much, and I look up to you. You are my hero! Oh my god, I was like, ‘Really? You look up to me?’”

Reflecting on value of neighbourhood houses, Najia related, "When I put my foot in here, I was welcomed and I was treated with respect. When you love what you do, it shows. When you see people working because they care, you will see it. When you have people working just because of their paycheque, you will see that. We have a great executive director. She's amazing. All the directors are easy-going people who always encourage new ideas. A lot of people here put in a lot of time that they don't get paid for, but they never say anything. I'm one of them. What can we do? I am here as a worker and a volunteer at the same time because sometimes you need to reach out to make a difference. You can't just say, 'Sorry my time is up, I need to go home.' That creates a barrier and prevents trust from developing. It's those relationships that keep people coming back to the neighbourhood house: they know that somebody here cares." She added, "It's amazing when you make a difference in someone's life. That makes up for all the money in the world. It gives you power. It comes back to love: when you put love first, the things you get back are priceless."

Najia concluded, "Love makes miracles. I've seen that in my own life. I was in an abusive relationship for nine years. I lost myself. I was like a zombie. I started believing that I couldn't do anything, that I'm nobody and I'm all these things that he said. I have almost no memories from that time, almost my whole twenties. I was just numb. Finally, when my kids were three years old, I decided that I could not allow them to be in that environment. When I decided to leave, he told me, 'You can't take anything with you.' So I put my trust in God and left with just me and my kids, and he took everything. Through the love and care that kind people showed me, I found a place to live, I found a job, and everything worked out. Now I think that if I hadn't gone through what I went through, I would be just another person that had fun and friends and did not learn much. But going through those hardships made me question everything. Now I use my experience to help other women - my sisters - who are going through a hard time. When I go home, and I put my head on the pillow, I'm the happiest person on the planet."