

Telling our Stories, Finding our Roots: Themes from audio interviews

INTRODUCTION

It has been my privilege to listen to all the interviews undertaken and together they are a remarkable collection of individual stories with many interwoven threads, creating a marvellously colourful cloth. It is impossible to do them justice in a few short minutes, each should be honoured as an individual story but I've pulled out a few common themes which will hopefully convey something of their flavour.

RACISM

Regrettably I must start with the discordant but pervasive theme of racism, which has strongly affected many of the lives we hear about. It is particularly distressing that it was frequently some extreme form of racism that drove people to leave their place of origin in the first place, only to be faced with overt and covert xenophobia in their place of refuge. It is impressive how often they meet it with patience and a willingness to understand and educate rather than react.

WEATHER

On a lighter but still discordant note, the weather gets many a mention – the struggle to adjust to the damp greyness that can be Devon's lot is daunting, actually depressing for people accustomed to the sun!

EDUCATION & LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

The desire to communicate and be understood and to take responsibility for improving their own lives is a powerful theme; to ensure the best possible education for children is another. The mention of a special teacher who understood, protected and promoted recurs and made me think about the importance of TOSFOR's role in resourcing and supporting teachers now.

COMMUNITY & FAITH

Maslow's famous pyramid of human needs puts 'Belonging' immediately above Survival and Safety, yet the newly arrived and culturally different frequently face serious challenges in finding their place. Poverty, inadequate housing, employment problems, lack of language, poor health and identity crises are just some of the things

that make adjusting and settling difficult. Faith communities are often cited as the starting place for making connections and finding acceptance and support.

CULTURE & FAMILY

Balancing the tension of incorporating the new whilst preserving and maintaining the old is a common struggle which becomes acute where children of first generation families are concerned. Adolescents especially are pulled between the norms of their peers and the different expectations of their families creating severe stresses for all involved. Rarely an easy phase in family lives, the cultural difference adds potency. It's interesting that a fierce denial of the culture of origin as a teenager can later be cause for pride, reclaimed and celebrated.

Many families are divided across nations having sought refuge wherever they could and they are left isolated without the traditional support of relatives that could mitigate the impacts of displacement. Loss of parents has an added poignancy when they are the last link with the culture of origin.

FOOD

The cultural currency of food is a constant theme, opening doors to communication and communal pleasure. I notice that as a group, TOSFOR has reflected many of the positive themes that emerge from the accounts of individual experience and sharing food before meetings has been a valuable part of our group culture.

And this is but a tiny taste of the interviews themselves. For now I must say thank you to everyone who took part, the listeners and the tellers and for the stories, told with such passion and honesty.

I'll end by quoting Edward Sapir, world renowned anthropologist, who observed that 'The real place where culture happens is in personal interactions'. These highly personal interviews, shared with many, can only enhance the rich culture of Exeter and beyond.

Viv Horton

Trustee, DDE

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