

Immigrant experiences related at K-W Forum

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A Chilean native sums up the teenaged immigrant experience in Waterloo Region this way:

"It's a lot of emotional stress," says the 19-year-old high school student, attending a community forum Monday on challenges facing immigrant youth in Waterloo Region.

"I had no friends and it's so easy to be mean -- especially when you don't understand why the people next to you (are different). I'd go to camp with all these Canadian kids with all their Nike shoes and I felt like a geek."

There were also conflicting pressures on the teen -- who immigrated to Waterloo Region with her single mom about 10 years ago -- to fit in with her non-immigrant peers, maintain her own heritage and transcend the language barrier at school.

And then there were battles with her mother over issues like premarital sex, drugs and dating.

"Immigrants treat these things as end-of-the-world issues," she says. "They don't sit down and talk to you about it. You're shaming the family."

On top of this, there's "an expectation that you have to succeed."

"She basically gave up her life for me -- and (immigrant parents) tell you that, too," the teen says. "My mom expects me to go to university and get this great job and be successful and to have a good life."

Though she has no problem with this, she wants it to be on her own terms.

"I like art, but my mom is more 'You should become a lawyer.' But I think success and happiness are different categories."

These were but a few of the many concerns articulated by about 40 teenagers, parents, teachers and community workers attending the forum, hosted by the Centre for Research and Education in Human Services .

Federally funded, the forum was part of an eight-month research project to define the challenges facing immigrant youth and come up with strategies to deal with them.

With the fourth highest percentage of immigrants in Canada, and with 42 per cent of them under age 20, it's an issue especially pivotal in Waterloo Region.

Among the audience suggestions:

Create a regional youth council.

Provide recreational opportunities for immigrant youths to socialize

Encourage social agencies to be more responsive to immigrant youth.

Link school programs for immigrants with the broader community.

In schools, provide more integration of English as a Second Language programs with the study of core subjects.

Pair up youths with fellow immigrants as tutors.

Set up cross-cultural exchange evenings

The centre will hand the data over to a steering committee for study and an eventual list of recommendations.

Credit: Record staff

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