

## Successful Project Launch

The conference room at the Centre for Research and Education in Human Services overflowed with people, energy and enthusiasm on March 30. Community members, project partners, university faculty and politicians joined together for the launch of the new five-year CURA project: *Taking Culture Seriously: Community Mental Health in Context*.



Wilfrid Laurier graduate student and her child listen as Ken Seiling, Waterloo Region Chair, greets Launch guests.



Kristen Roderick adds stone to base of bamboo

## Symbolic bamboo plant

The focal point of the room was a tall, strong bamboo plant, the symbol chosen for the project. Marilyn Malton, launch chair and president of the Board of Directors of CREHS, explained the significance of the bamboo plant.

"Bamboo has come to symbolize resilience and flexibility," she said, "characteristics that are strongly reflected in the work and lives of the community and university project partners from Toronto and Waterloo Region."

She added that the five stalks represent health, the five years of the project, and the perspectives of the five cultural-linguistic communities that are participating in the project. The three strong shoots at the front correspond to the three components of the project: research, training, and knowledge mobilization. The one stalk wraps around the other two, showing how research is interwoven with the other two components.

"Members of the partnership group have placed stones at the base of the plant to provide a foundation and support for the plant's growth, just as the work of the partnership group has provided a firm beginning for Taking Culture Seriously," she explained. All participants at the Launch were invited to add a stone as a sign of commitment and contribution to the project.

## Praise from funder

The CURA project is funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and the Ontario Trillium Foundation. Eric Bastien, Senior Program Officer, Strategic Programs and Joint Initiatives Division, spoke on behalf of SSHRC. He explained that SSHRC funds research proposals only after rigorous peer review to ensure that only the best projects receive funding.

**"The project we are celebrating today is indeed one of the very best to be awarded funding this year...one of just 15 projects, out of 118, in the whole country to receive this type of grant."**

**- Eric Bastien, SSHRC**

He praised the project partners for combining outstanding scholarship with social and economic resonance. "This project addresses a need that has been identified by the local community – providing effective mental health support to Canadians from diverse cultural backgrounds."

## Diverse cultural backgrounds

People from many cultural backgrounds attended the Launch. Osman Ali, president of the Somali Canadian Association of Etobicoke, spoke about the importance of understanding mental health from a cultural perspective. "Mental health is a problem that affects every culture, every nation, but it's something people don't want to talk about. This is the kind of project that is needed."



Osman Ali,  
president of the  
Somali  
Canadian  
Association of  
Etobicoke

He mentioned his organization's previous experience in working with CREHS on another project. "Research after research had been done, but finally we came to CREHS and the federal and provincial governments came onside. Projects like this are supported by government, communities and universities. I'm proud to be a part of it."

Joanna Ochocka, CURA Director, and director of CREHS, spoke of the impact that this project's participatory approach will have on partner organizations, the academic community and cultural-linguistic communities. "This partnership research breaks down barriers between researchers and researched," she explained, "balances community relevance with academic excellence, creates synergy to tackle difficult issues that no one partner could do alone, and combines knowledge production with action for social change to improve health and human welfare." She then introduced the partners in the project (see photo below).



Back (l to r): Joanna Ochocka, CREHS; Andrew Taylor, CREHS; Laura Simich, University of Toronto (U of T)/Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH); Geoffrey Nelson, Wilfrid Laurier University (WLU); Shawn Lauzon, Ontario Peer Development Initiative (OPDI); Sarah Maiter, WLU; Debbie Douglas, Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants; Augie Fleras, University of Waterloo; Don Roth, Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) Waterloo Region Branch

Front (l to r): Raymond Cheng, OPDI; Gebre Berihun, Kitchener Downtown Community Health Centre; Rich Janzen, CREHS; Anne Westhues, WLU; Nora Jacobson, U of T/CAMH; Julie Wise, CREHS

Absent: Richard Walsh-Bowers, WLU; Paula Goering, U of T/CAMH; George Tolomiczenko, St. Joseph's Hospital; Brenda Bunting, CMHA Metro Toronto Branch

### Interest and support

Following the festivities, a number of community participants expressed support and interest in the project. Grace Chen commented that the participatory research approach used by CREHS provides a good way for communities to become actively involved in the project. Ana Martinez pointed out that frontline community workers know that mental health is an issue among all cultural communities. "We want to work together to see how we can bring change to the community."



Joy Hu,  
Grace  
Chen and  
Ana Luz  
Martinez  
share  
ideas after  
the launch

For Hsaio D'Ailly, the project is timely and addresses an important issue. "Having people from different cultural contexts is crucial," she stressed.

Shaku Ahluwalia added that, although mental health issues pervade all cultures, among certain cultural communities it is not talked about. This makes it difficult for people to get the help and services they need. "It's hard for people to admit that something's wrong, to go and get counseling," she said. "We have extended families and normally talk to them. But here (in Canada), we don't always have that."

Over the next six months, project partners will be busy as various activities and research methods begin. Check the CURA website regularly for updates about activities, and for information about related workshops and conferences, check the CURA website regularly at [www.crehscura.com](http://www.crehscura.com)

### Next Steps

#### Spring 2005

- Site visits with each of the cultural-linguistic communities
- Hire and train graduate students for research assistant positions
- International literature review begins

#### Fall 2005

- Steering Committees begin work in Toronto and Waterloo Region
- Hire and train members of cultural-linguistic communities as community researchers
- Data gathering starts (key-informant interviews, web-based survey)