

Twelve Years of Belonging

Today marks twelve years that I've been blessed to be part of the IRCOM community. I know that I am not here by accident but rather by design. It has been the most incredible journey; one that has brought me into the lives of hundreds of new Canadians, and has brought them into my heart. I have chosen and continue to choose these relationships and this community.

IRCOM is not utopia; it is a real place with real human beings, dreams and challenges, celebrations and heartbreak. It is a place filled with complicated lives, where hope is delicate and pain often prevails. We've shared many struggles, IRCOM and I. Those lonely and cold moments shook my faith in humanity and threatened to break my resolve. In the last twelve years I've attended too many funerals, many for children and youth too young to be gone. I've seen families removed by Canadian Border Service agents. I've watched hardworking people desperate to rebuild their lives lose their legal status in Canada. I've witnessed as they've gone quietly underground, only to live in constant uncertainty and fear, hoping to restore their right to remain in our community. I've been to court to fight deportations. I've seen trauma on the bodies of children, terror in the eyes of women, and emptiness in the faces of men. I've seen broken people, with physical scars from bombs, guns, and senseless wars. I've heard the stories of survivors only to "witness" the atrocities they described in my own dreams. The last dozen years have changed

me, and I will never be able to change back; nor would I want to. Our families have transformed who I am. They've taught me things I could have only learned through this beautiful and inspirational voyage with them.

IRCOM is a social-profit organization whose impact makes our community, our city, and our country a far more welcoming, inclusive, and diverse society. It was built by visionaries; courageous, determined, passionately brilliant people with lived expertise as immigrants and refugees, who saw the world as their home and sought to rebuild their lives in Canada.



I started here as a volunteer, sitting at a table with women from across the world. For many of them, it was their first time in a school setting, learning to read and write. As much as my support was important, it was actually my presence that mattered the most. Beautiful friendships grew between us. Then a teaching job became available. I started working at IRCOM for ten hours a week. The other 27.5 hours I volunteered. I was overjoyed to give my time, energy, ideas, friendship, and my passion to help create something incredible. I am grateful to be here to see that dream realized.

I only learned a few years ago that I myself came to Canada as a refugee. My heart swelled with pride. The refugee story is one of resilience and resistance. My connection to our community found yet another thread of shared experience. I had long understood the struggle of migration and resettlement. Even as a child, I was acutely aware of my parents' grief. They lost everything. Not just the material things, they lost the value of their education, their years of work experience, and their plans for their own futures. We, their five children, carried the burden of those losses and always felt there was little choice but to make something of ourselves.

What I've done with my life is allowing it to be led by my heart. In the all these years, I've learned there's no greater honour than to be called "sister". I have family from Syria, Somalia, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Nepal, India, Bangladesh, Venezuela, Burundi, Myanmar, Sierra Leone, Ukraine, Mexico, Colombia, Afghanistan, Iraq, Kenya, South Sudan, Nigeria, Tunisia, Uganda, DR Congo, Iraq, Nicaragua,

Tanzania, and many more places. I've learned that suffering, pain, sadness, loneliness - they have limits. But there are no limits to joy, laughter, and love. They go on forever. This is where our spirits live and thrive, where community is built, and where we build belonging.

IRCOM is a peaceful village of gentle and courageous warriors. We, the tenants, community members, volunteers, and staff are not blind to race, religion, and gender. We see all that makes us different on the surface - to say anything else would be naïve and dishonest. But we consciously choose to look at the world, not with our eyes, but with our hearts, and to recognize kindness and kinship in one another. We know that we have a responsibility to care for each other. No amount of government, corporate, or non-profit services can ever replace the goodwill of a neighbour.

I believe in the inherent goodness in people. I believe that the future of our nation is found in the bright and hopeful eyes of mothers, fathers, youth and children who have not allowed themselves to be hardened by their suffering, but instead have chosen love and compassion.

Every morning for the past twelve years, I've been traveling east on my way to IRCOM, towards the rising sun, looking to the horizon. At the end of every day, going home, I've travelled west, following the fading skyline. My eyes have only looked at what's possible; though it might appear beyond my reach. That is what my hope looks like, a distant beacon of light, and as long as I carry it, IRCOM will continue to be my home.



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