



"Working with newcomers was helpful to my immigration process."

## Profile: Neeru Mishra

Advocating for newcomer women **BY** Brian J. D'Souza

"MY HUSBAND, HE chose to do his Ph.D. at University of Toronto, so for family life and that kind of support, we all came to Canada together in 2004," explains Neeru Mishra of her choice to immigrate to Canada from Kashmir, India.

The mother of a six-year-old daughter, Mishra's first impression of the country was not confusion from culture shock. "It was so cosmopolitan. There were people from all parts of India; you see different people who speak different languages." On the humorous side, she notes that the dialect spoken in North America wasn't the British English she was used to.

Having earned a law degree from University of Jammu and practised law for eight years, Mishra was disappointed when initial attempts to reassert herself in her profession were not successful. "After coming here, I thought that maybe I can start my career as a lawyer. But they told me to do [an] exam and then bar law, and it is hard when you come here and you have family and you have children." The strain of her familial duties combined with many bureaucratic hurdles made her lower her expectations — but only for a short time.

Like many other newcomers before her, she got her start by volunteering. "I joined Community Matters, a grassroots-level organization working to help newcomers at St. James Town in downtown." Above and beyond the networking opportunities it gave her, Mishra found that, "Working with newcomers was help-

ful to my integration process also."

Mishra was, in fact, not a beginner when it came to volunteering or activism — she had plenty of experience accrued in India where she volunteered with the National Service Scheme, run by the Ministry of Youth Affairs. "[I] visited all parts of India, which helped me to understand the issues affecting the condition of women in different parts. I also did research on women prisoners and their rehabilitation in the state of Jammu and Kashmir."

Mishra eventually discovered the Toronto Centre for Community Learning and Development's immigrant women integration program, designed to help newcomer women make an impact in their communities. The program consisted of about 15–20 hours of classes per week for 10 months — which she managed to fit into her tight timetable.

"I want to work for women who are lagging behind in making their careers in the process of settlement for the sake of their family," says Mishra, who now sits on the centre's board of directors as well as that of Sherbourne Health Centre. "The skills and capacities they bring along with them get lost in this process." The myth that these women came to Canada with nothing to offer is disturbing to Mishra, and she wants to see attitudes change so women can achieve more.

Her advice for immigrant women? "Always keep on trying for new options and never give up. Every experience teaches you something." ■