

Determined pupils overcome hurdles

Limited English only first obstacle

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When nine-year-old Khesro Amin marched through the front doors of Burnaby's Maywood Elementary in May, 2001, it marked the end of one epic journey — and the beginning of another. A Kurd from northern Iraq, Khesro arrived in British Columbia as a government-sponsored refugee, along with his parents and three siblings. The Amins had sold their home and possessions to send Khesro and his father to Syria in 1995; it had taken another five years to earn enough money to smuggle the others out of Iraq, where Saddam Hussein was waging a violent campaign against Kurdish rebels.

Reunited in Syria, the family received offers of asylum from Britain and Canada, and chose the latter. They arrived in Toronto during a late-season snowstorm and were put up in a Mississauga motel. "Is this going to be our life?" Khesro's older sister asked dejectedly. A friend recommended Vancouver and the family moved to south Burnaby, to a densely populated, mostly immigrant neighbourhood.



CHRIS BOLIN FOR THE TORONTO STAR
For nine-year-old Khesro Amin, a Kurd from northern Iraq, Burnaby's Maywood Elementary School, which offers a sense of community for families, has proven to be almost like a second home.

Once settled, Khesro faced the prospect of going to school for the first time in his life. He did not know how to read or write in his native Farsi, never mind in English. He spoke only a few words of the new language. "I didn't know anything," he remembers.

On that first day, his heart swimming in his chest, Khesro was escorted into a classroom during recess to await the arrival of his new Grade 5 classmates. They flooded into their desks and stared at the new arrival, a small boy with dark eyes, close-cropped hair and an even stare. "I wondered what are they looking at?" remembers Khesro. "I'm a kid just like them. What are they looking at?"

One of his classmates, Morgan, volunteered to show him around the school and introduce him to things like gym class and library books, basketball and bathrooms. Morgan, himself a recent immigrant from the Philippines, would become Khesro's best friend, even though at first the two shared only the shortest of conversations. Soccer was the language of their young friendship. Although almost everything about school was new to Khesro, he was not intimidated by the learning curve that loomed before him. He was too excited to be scared. After watching other children parade to school in other places, he was thrilled to finally join their ranks. "When I was young, I liked school really much," he says. "I thought it was something cool. I'd wake up in the morning and think, 'Ahhhh, school!' I thought it was cool, so I practised so much."

Maywood was, in many ways, well suited to Khesro's needs. Maywood Elementary is a V-shaped building crowned with a smaller second storey. It looks like a miniature airport, which is appropriate, since the school lands a steady stream of newcomers.

During the past seven years, the school's English-as-a-second-language population has skyrocketed from 150 to 610. Foreign-born students now make up 75 per cent of the student body. Most are from China, but there are also many from Iran and Afghanistan. Because of its student population and location in one of Burnaby's poorest neighbourhoods, Maywood has been designated by the local board of education as a "community school." Such schools receive extra financing from both the school board and the City of Burnaby to meet the challenges posed by a student population with profound educational and social needs.

"Here, the belief is that the children belong to a family which belongs to a community," says Doreen George, who co-ordinates the extra programs that operate on school premises. There's a family gym hour so that those living in crowded apartments can exercise with their children in the evening; there's a preschool program and a parenting class for pregnant women. The school offers adult ESL classes with child care so that immigrant parents can learn English. Maywood stays open each night until 10.

"I think it makes families feel they belong to a community and to a school," says George. For Khesro, the school has proven to be a second home during a difficult time. Unable to adjust to life in Canada, Khesro's father has left the family; his mother suffers from a chronic illness. But none of it has kept Khesro from his schoolwork.

By dint of his dedication, Khesro's literacy skills have improved dramatically. During his first summer holiday, he did little else but read books, carefully sounding out each word. He produced book reports based on question sheets from his ESL teacher.

"I got pages that said, 'Who was the main character? What was the plot?' These things make it easier for me. It gives me the idea. There's not just a blank piece of paper."

He returned to Maywood that next September and amazed the teachers with his progress. Most students who are illiterate in their first language take years to build reading and writing skills in English. But Khesro was placed into an advanced ESL class and quickly outpaced work in that one as well.

Now in Grade 7, Khesro is expected to begin regular classes in high school this fall, giving him a good chance to graduate and pursue higher education.

For Khesro, handwriting has been the steepest part of his learning curve. He has found it difficult to master the fine motor skills needed to craft small letters. "I've never done it," he says by way of explanation. "It's just something new," he adds, making sure it's understood that he will conquer this challenge, too. "I'm learning."

Khesro, who now earns mostly Bs and Cs in school, dreams of one day joining the Canadian military. He's already enlisted as a naval cadet with his best friend, Morgan. For now, though, he's focused on improving his school marks. "I want to get better marks and go to school. You have to study hard now in school. And if I want to go to military school, I have to get good grades to go. Everything right now, they're trying to make you get good grades." On her first day at Western Technical-Commercial School in Toronto, 15-year-old Memuna Kamara brought a large jug of water to class. She didn't know that Canadian schools were equipped with drinking fountains, since the ramshackle school she had attended in Sierra Leone's Freetown had none. She had not set foot inside that school for more than a year because of the 11-year civil war that has ravaged her homeland in West Africa. "There was no school: We'd just sit at home and cry and wonder if the war was coming," Memuna says.

Her father was in Canada during those war years. Memuna's father had come to Toronto in 1990 as a family-class immigrant, sponsored by his uncle. He worked long hours at a local food-processing plant for 10 years to save enough money to bring Memuna, her older sister and mother to Canada. Months after that happy reunion, Memuna walked through the heavy wooden doors of Western Technical in September, 2000. She had no idea what to expect. She did not know a soul at the school, located near Bloor St. W. and Bathurst St., and she spoke only a few words of English.

Memuna was identified as a student with serious academic needs and was placed in a program designed for those who have significant gaps in their educations. The Literacy Enrichment Academic Program (LEAP) was created to deal with an influx of refugee and other immigrant students who show up on school steps ill-prepared to face the challenge of middle school and high school. Many have such poor literacy skills in their first languages that English-as-a-second-language classes are too tough for them.

**'There was no school: We'd
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***Fifteen-year-old Memuna Kamara,
on her life in Sierra Leone***

In small classes, LEAP instructors assess the gaps in each student's educations and teach to those needs, concentrating on literacy and numeracy. The idea is to accelerate their development, doubling the learning they would normally achieve in a single school year, so they can join mainstream programs as quickly as possible.

Memuna's Canadian education began with the alphabet. Her teachers taught her how to hold scissors, how to use a paper clip. "Everything was a new experience," says her teacher, Genine Natale. "It was like having a newborn." Memuna remembers being full of nerves those first weeks. "I was kind of scared," she says. "I was lost in the school. I didn't know how to find my way out." Memuna's father was almost as nervous as she was during those fledgling school days. He took vacation days to help her navigate the bus from Albion Road., north of Highway 401, to Western Tech; the trip would routinely take more than 90 minutes. "He was here every day," she laughs, remembering this man she hadn't known since she was four. "He wanted to check on how we're doing. He wanted to know if we were getting used to the system, making some friends, getting used to the teacher. He was here every day. He wanted to show me everything about Canada."

Three years after entering Western Tech, Memuna takes four regular credit courses, but keeps one foot in the LEAP program. She's 18 years old, so it will be impossible for her to graduate before she moves into adult education programs at 19. Memuna will be classified as a dropout by some researchers, even though her progress will have been nothing short of miraculous. She has gone from deciphering the alphabet to studying Grade 10 Canadian history in just three years. "I thank my teachers every night and day because if it wasn't for them and this (LEAP) class, I wouldn't be in school," she says.

Memuna understands that her academic road will be a long one, one that will likely lead to adult-education classes at Humber College this fall, then, if she succeeds, into regular college courses.

She has serious disadvantages to overcome, yet Memuna is determined to become a businesswoman.

Memuna draws inspiration from her father. He gets out of bed every day at 5 a.m. and goes to work faithfully whatever the weather; he dresses like a "crazy person" in the winter, Memuna says, with two hats and layer upon layer of sweaters.

"I admire him so much," she says. "I hold onto that. No matter what people think about me, I don't care. But for myself, it's about what I'm going to do, what I'm going to be, to make my father proud."

Allen Zhang likes to make things difficult for himself. A Grade 10 student at Burnaby South Secondary School, Zhang, 15, emigrated to British Columbia two years ago with a rudimentary knowledge of English. But Zhang quickly came to understand that he didn't need much English to make friends, since Burnaby South's students were, like him, immigrant Chinese. Although anxious to make friends, Zhang also knew that his language development would suffer if he spoke only Mandarin in the cafeteria and in the hallways. He set a goal for himself: Meet Canadians. "It was easier to make Chinese friends because you are from the same culture, you can talk to them in your language. But I saw the need to really improve my English in a short period of time, so I tried to take as many opportunities as I could get to speak English instead of Mandarin. That meant socializing more with Canadian friends and others who spoke English. As the days passed, my English evolved faster and faster."

Making Canadian friends is often an enormous hurdle for immigrant students, especially for those in areas dominated by one or two immigrant groups. In many schools on B.C.'s Lower Mainland, for instance, native Mandarin or Punjabi speakers outnumber native English speakers. Studies have shown that acquiring English skills can be slower for immigrants in such schools because they spend so much of their time communicating in their first languages. But Zhang has too much ambition to be slowed by language. He wants to graduate from high school in two years and study commerce at university. Already, two years after launching his Canadian academic career in ESL 1 — the introductory English-as-a-second-language class — he has graduated to the university-bound stream, English 10 Honours, where he studies alongside Canadian-born students. He takes a full schedule of regular classes and is among the best students in school.

Zhang says the keys to his success have been hard work and a willingness to speak English, regardless of his mistakes.

"Basically, I think, nothing comes for free," he says. "You have to work for it. In my country, they said you'd learn English automatically if you came to Canada. But it didn't work like that. "You didn't wake up one morning and start talking and reading English. You have to learn every single word that you can speak now ... You have to take it as a chance to meet new people, and learn new things and that's what really life is about."

Zhang has seen many of his fellow immigrant students follow a downward spiral. Too shy to make Canadian friends, they live largely in their own immigrant communities. Then, frustrated and embarrassed by their continued mistakes in English, they speak in school less and less.

"When you make a pronunciation mistake, you just get a feeling that you're inferior to others because you can't explain things that you know clearly. So, that brings your confidence level down," he says. "When you're not that good at English in the first place and you lose your confidence, you start to talk less. So, when you have the chance to talk, you want to keep your

voice down so when you make a mistake people won't laugh at you. You start writing things down. You start eliminating all those opportunities that you could practise. Instead of that, you just sink into a pit deeper and deeper. That's the most scary thing."

Zhang's mother and father — he is a university professor looking for work in Canada — left Beijing in search of a new and more interesting life. In China, Zhang says, students felt intense pressure to compete for places in universities and some pursued prestigious programs such as computer engineering even though they were uninterested.

"Here, it's totally up to the individual. If you want to go to class, you go. If you don't, you don't," he says. Zhang is one member of a remarkably successful cohort of Chinese students who have transformed schools in Burnaby, earning stratospheric marks in maths and science. They have also brought unusual pressures to bear on local school boards.

For one thing, says Mat Hassen, Burnaby's assistant superintendent, many Chinese parents don't put value on ESL classes. As soon as their children can communicate in English, they want them transferred out of ESL classes.

"They see ESL as a stigma and they want out," he explains. "They see us as blocking their progress, delaying their graduation, artificially denying progress. In some cases, it's because there's a misunderstanding of language development by parents, who say, 'The kid seems to speak English OK, so what do you mean he needs ESL?'"

The honour rolls in Burnaby are filled with the names of Asian students, and even that has created problems for school board officials. "Some real animosities have developed," says Hassen. "You have Canadian kids saying they can't compete with the Chinese. It gets that bare in its exposure."

At Burnaby South, Allen Zhang speaks slowly and thoughtfully, pausing between words as if to make sure the next one is correct. He makes few obvious errors. He has also set for himself a new goal, one that has little to do with language: He wants to win a spot on the six-member national team that competes in the International Math Olympiad in Athens. Zhang ranked 15th in a nation-wide math contest in January; he hopes to make it into the top six.

"I think the most important thing for me is to keep setting new goals. Only then will you have the momentum to keep going. Bring challenges to yourself and work hard to defeat them. When you defeat them, you get the feeling of success," he says. "'It's difficult but that's what sparks your life. For me, that surge of excitement, that surge of challenge, if that didn't occur to me, life wouldn't be as interesting to me as it is."