

## Dr. Water gets his groove back

By MARINA JIMÉNEZ

Seven months ago, Mansoor Ali was folding laundry for a living – just one more under-employed immigrant watching his dream of a better life in Canada evaporate.

Now, he's known as "Dr. Water" around town hall in Markham, where the experienced engineer from Pakistan is fine-tuning the municipality's sewer system.

"I came here as a skilled immigrant with great hopes of a new life, a better life," says Mr. Ali, a 43-year-old Karachi native who has a master's degree in water and environmental management from Loughborough University in England and an international development planning diploma from the University of Guelph.

"But then I realized nobody cared about my wonderful education."

He says he was "saved" by a unique program called Career Bridge, which offers foreign professionals in the Toronto area a chance to complete internships at major companies, banks and public institutions, where placements can lead to permanent employment.

The brainchild of the Toronto Region Immigrant Employment Council, a civic volunteer organization, the program is run by a non-profit organization called Career Edge. They have placed 128 paid interns and persuaded 75 employers to come on board. The town of Markham was one of the first.

"Mr. Ali has given great depth to our water department. He has given us a great advantage, and he has helped us as a town reach out to more new immigrants," says Don Cousens, mayor of Markham, where half the 230,000 residents are foreign-born.



"We are the second-most-diverse community in Canada after Richmond, B.C."

A recent Statistics Canada study of 164,200 immigrants who arrived in 2000 and 2001 found that 70 per cent had problems entering the labour force. Six in 10 were forced to take jobs other than those they were trained to do.

Career Bridge is designed to tap the skills of these frustrated foreigners, who have complained for years about the difficulty they have getting their credentials recognized, and give them that much-needed "Canadian experience."

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## Dr. Water gets his groove back continued

With his expertise in water supply, Mr. Ali was hired to build a pipeline model to analyze and monitor sewage capacity for Markham. For the first six months, he earned a \$20,000 stipend.

Once the internship ended, however, he was hired as a development coordinator at more than triple the salary. He is now in charge of engineering activity for a quarter of the town, which means all developers must seek his approval for future building projects.

"The people in Markham Town Hall treat me as a team member," Mr. Ali says. "And being a professional working in my field again has given me back my confidence."

Steve Andrews, Markham's manager of development engineering and Mr. Ali's mentor, says his protégé brings vitality and energy to the job. "He is a good fit for the organization and learns quickly," he says. "I am guiding him through the process, teaching him our relationship with the consulting industry and the general protocols we go through."

Mr. Ali immigrated to Canada in May of 2003 with his wife and three children,

leaving behind a comfortable life in Karachi and a job with the Aga Khan Planning and Building Service.

During his 18-year career, he oversaw major engineering projects in Pakistan, including an initiative in northern Pakistan that brought a water-supply system to more than 100 villages and helped to eradicate the community's gastrointestinal diseases and other health problems.

When his Career Bridge internship ended, Mansoor Ali was hired as a development coordinator. He is now in charge of engineering activity for a quarter of the town of Markham.

Mr. Ali was also a technical adviser on two large-scale residential projects in Karachi, the Al-Azhar Garden and the Gulshan-e-Noor.

When he left Pakistan, it was in the belief that Canada needed his skills and that his children would have a better life in a developed country. He sent out more than 200 résumés in

Toronto. But he was only called for one job interview, and the employer told him he was overqualified. In desperation, he finally took the job in the laundrette.

"I was at my lowest point, literally crying," Mr. Ali says. "It was beyond ridiculous. I was just one more disappointed immigrant."

Through a workshop, he found out about Career Bridge and registered with the program, which is open only to those with proper qualifications, fluent English and professional experience in their field.

With his mentor's encouragement, Mr. Ali has begun the arduous and expensive process of re-qualifying and becoming a licensed engineer in the province.

Pakistan's loss is now Canada's gain, Mr. Ali says.

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