

CELEBRATION OF CULTURE: A Spotlight on the Healthy Lifestyles Program



BY MEGAN CHUCHMACH

Six women from six different countries gather on a Tuesday morning at the Sunnydale Community Centre in Waterloo. They chat about their differences, such as ethnic traditions, culinary customs, and ways of life in their homelands of Somalia, Poland, Kenya, Sudan, Mexico, and China. But as these women share their stories, the theme of discussion becomes not one of difference, but of similarity: they exchange experiences as immigrant women in Canada - raising children, finding employment, and embracing a new community.

These women are participants in FEW's Healthy Lifestyle Program, a series of outreach workshops which seek to enhance the quality of life of immigrant and visible minority women in Waterloo region. In order to reach out to women within their own communities, the Healthy Lifestyles program is currently held at four locations - Ontario Early Years Centre, Chandler, Mowat Community Centre, Courtland-Shelly Community Centre, and Sunnydale Community Centre.

By focusing on different themes each week, including parenting, nutrition, and women's health, participants interact in a casual social setting while learning about various topics and one another. Each topic revolves around a model unique to Healthy Lifestyles: firstly, the woman; secondly, her family; and thirdly, her community.

On this particular morning, group leader Barbara Bocek focuses the kitchen-table discussion around Canada's Food Guide. The women introduce themselves and discuss their heritage and favourite family celebrations. Barbara then introduces the topic of nutrition and emphasizes the importance of including all four food groups in a daily diet. The morning concludes with a recipe exchange in which the women chat about the favourite foods they prepare.

Participants leave with warm goodbyes to each other and express excitement for their next meeting. The friendships they have formed are evident and their care for another shines through. "I like this group because it cheers me up," one woman says.

"We are like a big family: not alone, but part of a group." "It's really good for sharing our ideas and experiences," adds another participant. "Some of us are mothers for the first time, and others help by sharing their experiences. There are so many things you can learn from the community."

It is clear that the women in the Healthy Lifestyles Program are empowered by gathering to discuss issues that affect them on a daily basis. They talk about where they have been and where they would like to go. The knowledge they gain, not only about the week's topic but also from one another, helps to ensure that their futures in Canada are bright ones.

