

BUSINESS

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Newcomer entrepreneurship in the Comox Valley

Month-long series aims to dispel myths while sharing experiences of business owners who settled in the Valley

Contributed by The Welcoming Communities Coalition

Does immigration have a positive impact on our communities?

The Welcoming Communities Coalition (WCC) would answer that question with a resounding “Yes!”

The WCC wanted to know what local residents had to say, and the questions were posed to people in the Comox Valley and Campbell River in a survey conducted in late 2020.

Of the 203 people who responded, 87 per cent agreed or strongly agreed, stating that immigration contributes to arts and culture in Canada, encourages diversity, fuels economic growth, helps with population growth caused by an aging population and low birth rate, and increases the quality of life and vibrancy where we live.

Seven per cent stated they had no opinion about the impact of immigration on our communities, and six per cent disagreed or strongly disagreed that the impact is positive.

Canada plans to bring in 411,000 newcomers to the country in 2022. Nationally, in an Angus Reid poll conducted in 2021, around 39 per cent

of Canadians said that the target is too high.

There is work to be done dispelling myths around the impact of immigration and in making our communities more welcoming for newcomers. One common misconception is that immigration is a drain on the country's economy.

Immigration accounts for nearly 100 per cent of Canada's labour force growth, according to the federal government, and experts increasingly agree that our economic growth is in peril without it.

Canada - and Vancouver Island - needs immigration for a wide range of reasons, from cultural enrichment to economic practicalities. This past November, RBC Economics released a report highlighting how 600,000 workers from the available labour market pool will leave over the next three years as a result of an aging workforce, just one of the issues bringing economic factors to the forefront.

Newcomers are also job creators, with one study by Statistics Canada finding that, from 2003 to 2013, immigrants represented 12 per cent of privately owned businesses and accounted for 25 per cent of net jobs created by privately incorporated companies during that period.

About 13 per cent of residents in the Comox Valley identify themselves as immigrants. The WCC works to encourage welcoming, inclusive communities; the hope is for our communities

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HOLLIE HA

to welcome newcomers to the Valley and Canada with open arms, but we know this isn't always the case.

To help build this sense of belonging, the WCC also hopes that when newcomers open the pages of their local newspaper they see the community they know - one that includes voices like theirs.

The WCC has interviewed four business owners in the Valley who immigrated to Canada. These four residents talked to the coalition about the challenges and surprises they experienced settling and finding employment, why they decided to own and operate a local business and the ways in which they were welcomed

and supported as they made this community their new home.

The coalition has partnered with the *Comox Valley Record* and Hollie Ha, the Comox Valley creator of the podcast *Holding Heritage*. Each week for the month of March, the *Record* will share the story of a newcomer who owns a business in the Valley and Ha will publish a podcast featuring the conversations along with bonus content that did not make it onto these pages. Head to holdingheritage.com or wherever you get your podcasts to listen to the episodes she has already published that deepen the understanding of Chinese-Vietnamese heritage in Canada.

“I believe it is incredibly important and fulfilling to listen to and uplift these stories and voices - not only to encourage and inspire other newcomers to build meaningful and fruitful lives, but to bridge gaps between the many unique cultures and groups that help our communities thrive, grow and evolve,” says Ha, a second generation Chinese-Vietnamese Canadian.

This article is the first in a March-long series contributed by The Immigrant Welcome Centre's Welcoming Communities Coalition on the North Island (immigrantwelcome.ca). The Coalition is funded by Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC). Read Linh Nguyen's story of starting Pearly Nails & Spa at only 23-years-old the March 9 issue.

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