

# Newcomer Entrepreneur Series 2022



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COMMUNITY NEWS MEDIA



Welcoming Communities Coalition  
Summary Report

# Newcomer Entrepreneur Series: Summary Report

## Part 1: Comox Valley

**Project completion:** March 2022 (Fiscal Year April 1<sup>st</sup> 2021 – March 31<sup>st</sup> 2022)

Misperceptions persist that newcomers “steal” Canadian jobs. In an [Angus Reid poll](#) taken in 2019, 29 per cent of respondents said that “new immigrants are taking too many jobs away from Canadians who already live here.”

Here on the Island, our 2020 Needs Assessment survey asked local residents if they think immigration has a positive impact on our communities. Of the 203 people who responded, 87 per cent agreed or strongly agreed that immigration has a positive impact, 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 quality of life and vibrancy where we live.

However, 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.

### **Proposal:**

The Welcoming Communities Coalition proposed a four-part written and audio series to amplify the voices of newcomers who own businesses - and create jobs - in the Comox Valley. We asked newcomers about their successes and challenges settling and running a business in the Valley, and the community impact of these businesses. The goal is to help dispel negative misconceptions about the impact of newcomers on the Canadian economy, to highlight diversity and amplify underrepresented voices in the Comox Valley, and contribute to making our communities more welcoming to newcomers in general.

The editorial team of *The Comox Valley Record* (Black Press) agreed to partner with us on this project, committing to publish one story a week for four weeks. Coalition community connections assistant Kristine Salzmann conducted the interviews as well as wrote the articles for publication.

The founder of Holding Heritage Cultural Co. also partnered with us. Hollie Ha recorded each of the interviews and edited the conversations into episodes for her podcast, which aims to deepen the understanding and appreciation of newcomer heritage in North America.

*Of the 2021 Needs identified by the Comox Valley Steering Committee in the fiscal year's Program Planning Model, this project falls under Need 2: “promote cultural diversity and sensitivity.”*

**Budget:** The Coalition honoured Hollie's contribution to the project with an honorarium of \$300.

### **Recognizing participants:**

While in the past the Coalition has recognized newcomers' participation in projects with honoraria, journalism ethics discourage paying people for interviews as it undermines journalistic independence and calls into question the credibility of the information received.

For this particular project, all participants are local business owners whose businesses received positive attention and promotion from print publication in *The Comox Valley Record* and audio publication through Holding Heritage. We made sure to provide the participants an opportunity to read the stories in advance of publication to ensure accuracy and comfort with the final version.

**Impact:**

- Circulation of *The Comox Valley Record* (in print): ~23,000
- Online (website) statistics:

Date Published Online	Profile	Page views	Unique views	Engaged minutes
<a href="#">20-Feb-22</a>	Series introduction (the "why")	591	487	284
<a href="#">08-Mar-22</a>	Pearly Nails & Spa - Linh Nguyen	668	436	390
<a href="#">13-Mar-22</a>	Gold Phoenix Asian Foods -Tania Ly	207	175	208
<a href="#">20-Mar-22</a>	HJ Landscaping - Juan Calero	177	138	107
<a href="#">29-Mar-22</a>	Wild Bee Florals - Thanu Eagalle	447	249	296

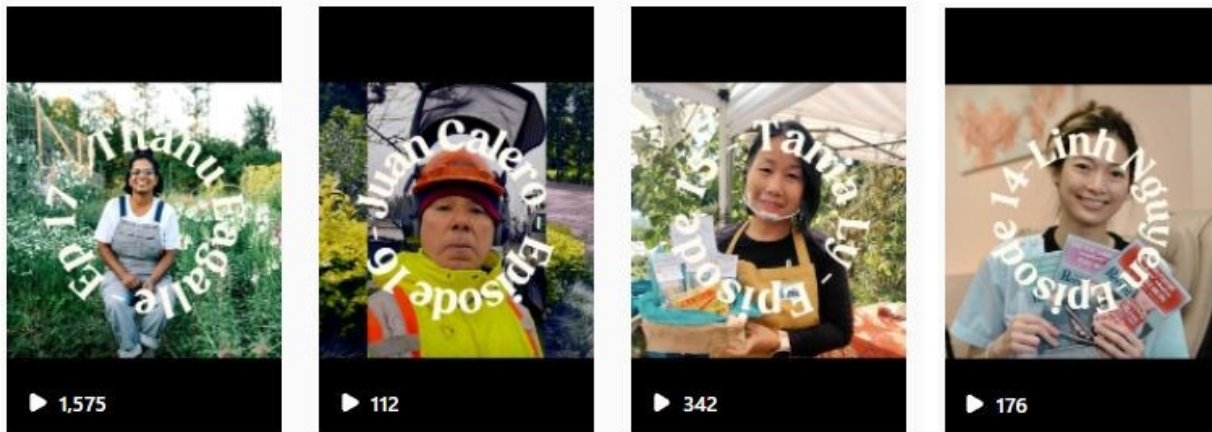
Holding Heritage podcast reach since launch in April 26, 2021 until December 31, 2022:

- 2,450+ unique downloads across 23 platforms
- Reached 30 countries and 193 cities worldwide (top 3: Canada, US, UK)
- Average of 200 listeners per episode to date
- 220+ combined Facebook and Instagram followers

Episode and Instagram statistics:

Statistic period	Unique downloads (total complete listen-throughs)	Instagram reel post views	Instagram post likes
March 9, 2022 until May 3, 2022 (~2 months)	More than 225 (Linh's was the most downloaded of the four episodes)	2,200	460

Instagram reel views as of May 3, 2022:



## Part 2: Campbell River

**Project completion:** November 2022 (Fiscal Year April 1<sup>st</sup> 2022 – March 31<sup>st</sup> 2023)

We were heartened by the reach and impact of the series in the Comox Valley. We decided to repeat this project in another region we serve: Campbell River.

*Of the 2022 Needs identified by the Campbell River Steering Committee in the fiscal year's Program Planning Model, this project also falls under Need 2: "promote cultural diversity and sensitivity."*

We once again partnered with Holding Heritage Cultural Co. and Black Press, this time *The Campbell River Mirror*.

*The Mirror* staff were publishing its first-ever *People Project* magazine. They published the first Newcomer Entrepreneur story in the newspaper on Oct. 19, 2022, and the second and third stories in the magazine, which came out on Oct. 26, 2022.

### Impact:

- Circulation of *The Campbell River Mirror* (in print): ~16,200
- Circulation of *The People Project* magazine: 14,000 (with 8,000 of those distributed at hotel lobbies, coffee shops, etc.)

Online reader statistics were not available from the publisher at the time of writing this report.

Date Published Online	Profile
<a href="#">19-Oct-22</a>	JRV Filipino Asian Store - Rica Briones and Ivan Raganot
<a href="#">26-Oct-22</a>	PhotoTech Foto Source - Sarmad Almouallem
<a href="#">26-Oct-22</a>	Pita Pit Campbell River - Taj Singh

Holding Heritage episode and Instagram statistics:

Statistic period	Unique downloads (total complete listen-throughs)	Instagram reel post views	Instagram post likes
Oct. 19, 2022 to Jan. 7, 2023 (~2.5 months)	More than 150	4,329	163

### Deepening community connections:

Rica Briones, the owner of JRV Filipino Store, wrote to us after the publication of her story expressing gratitude.

*"Our family would like to say thank you so much for featuring our store. It was a really big help. We notice that people starting to know us, specially when they read our story in the newspaper."*

Rica and Ivan are involved in the **Canadian-Filipino Cultural Association in Campbell River**. As a result of this project, they invited the Welcoming Communities Coalition to be the guest speaker at their annual Christmas event. Coalition Coordinator Julie Keumbhdjian gave a brief presentation about the IWC to the approximately 300 people in attendance.

Taj Singh, the owner of the Campbell River Pita Pit, also reached out. He said: *"I do not have words; You guys have*

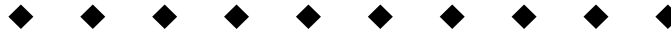
done amazing job with article and audio.”

We were also approached by **Economic Development Campbell River** to contribute content to their blog and social media for B.C. Multiculturalism Week (third week of Nov. 2022). They shared links to all three stories and podcast episodes on their website (<https://www.techatchery.ca/community-stories>) and Facebook page.

When we let Taj know that the story would also be shared through Campbell River Economic Development, he replied:

*“That’s fantastic! I appreciate you reaching out for the whole program and recognition you guys have given. It came out great, love the title, love the pictures.”*

At right is a screen shot example of what Economic Development CR posted for Photo Tech FotoSource:



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# BUSINESS

Email: editor@comoxvalleyrecord.com

## 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

“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.”

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](http://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](http://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.*

# AARON ROBERTSON

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# Salon owner opens business at 23 following emigration from Vietnam

By Staff Black Press Media

Imagine being 19 years old and coming to a small town on Vancouver Island from a metropolis of more than eight million people.

Linh Nguyen was a young adult when she emigrated with her mother and younger brother from bustling Ho Chi Minh City in Vietnam to the Comox Valley. Her stepfather had applied for them to join him in Canada 10 years prior, and their application had finally been accepted.

Nguyen remembers being very upset at the time of the move. She left her friends and post-secondary plans behind to come to a quiet town where she didn't speak the language.

"I didn't know how to order the apple juice on the airplane," she recalls. Little did she know that she would gain the courage to become a business owner in just a few years.

Shortly after her family arrived, in 2014, Nguyen took a job as a nail technician in order to help her family financially - it was one of the few jobs she could get with little English language proficiency. Her mom, Phuc Pham, had worked in the fishing industry in Vietnam and also became a nail technician in the Valley a year later. Her mom had always encouraged her to be independent - after a few years and with her mom's support, Nguyen decided to open her own nail salon.

Nguyen describes herself as very shy at the time and unsure of where to turn to for help. She found a space for lease at the Comox Centre Mall and approached the director of the ownership group, David Coon, who helped her through the process of setting up the business. She was 23 years old when she opened Pearly Nails and Spa in July 2018.



**Linh Nguyen worked as a nail technician when she first came to Canada from Vietnam. Nguyen started Pearly Nails & Spa with the support of her mom four years ago and was recognized for Best Manicure/Pedicure in the Record's Readers' Choice Awards. Photo by Erin Haluschak**

"I just feel like I am lucky to be here (in Comox)," she says. "I couldn't do it if it was (in) other cities."

This July will be four years since Pearly Nails & Spa opened its doors and for the past two years, her business has been voted "Best Manicure/Pedicure" in *The Comox Valley Record's* Readers' Choice Awards.

"For me, whoever comes here I want to give them the best experience because I know that life can be stressful... so whenever they come here I just want to give them the best time of the day or make them feel better."

Nguyen sees herself living in Comox long-term, although she misses large extended family gatherings during holidays such as the Lunar

New Year (her two older brothers stayed in Vietnam and her mom has eight siblings).

She still hopes to go to post-secondary school, but her goals have changed: at 19, she wanted to become a flight attendant and now she wants to take business courses at North Island College, both for her own growth and so that she can give advice to other women who want to start a business.

"Sometimes they just need people to support them, to let them know, 'yes, you can do it.' That was me."

Nguyen agreed to share her story with the *Record* and the Valley's Holding Heritage podcast (holdingheritage.com) because she wants to help other women and newcomers believe in themselves.

"Seven years ago when I came here, I never thought today I would be confident to talk to people like this. I would be very shy and didn't know what to do and always thinking that 'hey, I'm doing something wrong.' The reason I would like to share my story is if I can do it, everybody can do it."

*This article is the second in a March-long series contributed by The Immigrant Welcome Centre's Welcoming Communities Coalition that shares the experiences of newcomer entrepreneurs in the Comox Valley. The Coalition is funded by Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC). Listen to more of Linh Nguyen's story at holdingheritage.com or download the episode from Holding Heritage wherever you get your podcasts.*

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# BUSINESS

Email: editor@comoxvalleyrecord.com

## Bringing people and cultures together through food

### Black Press Submitted

Quite often, food is a gateway to another culture.

People make connections through shared meals, experiencing a new dish or an ingredient used in a different way. Food can also transport us to memories of home with a tantalizing aroma or single bite.

For more than 25 years, Phuong Ly has created a connection between the Comox Valley

and Chinese-Vietnamese culture through Gold Phoenix Asian Foods. Her business has evolved over time but the goal remains the same: to share authentic Chinese-Vietnamese dishes that bring people together no matter their cultural background.

Ly, who also goes by Tania, came to Canada in 1980 with her parents and siblings at 12 years old as a sponsored refugee from Vietnam. Hundreds of thousands of refugees fled at the end of the Vietnam War, often referred to as “boat people.” Ly’s family was targeted by the newly established Communist government for being ethnically Chinese.

Ly has told much of her journey to her daughter, Hollie Ha, who started the podcast Holding Heritage (holdingheritage.com). Listeners can tune into Episode 4 to hear some of Ly’s childhood memories growing up in Vietnam, the dangerous boat journey, and her family’s experiences in refugee camps in China and Hong Kong.

When Ly moved to the Comox Valley (via Calgary) in 1996 with her husband and two young children, she also turned to food for survival and connection. The couple came to the Valley pursuing an opportunity for her husband to work at a Denman Island shellfish farm. They longed for traditional Chinese and Vietnamese dishes, so Ly started making dishes from her childhood for their family and then for friends in the Valley. Soon, she quit her



**Tania (Phuong) Ly at a wonton demonstration she hosted with her daughter at Clever Crow Farm in Black Creek last summer. Photo submitted**

“I don’t know - how I did get the nerve to do that? But I did,” she says.

Gold Phoenix Asian Foods Restaurant opened in 2007. Ly says the restaurant was busy, but it was stressful and she realized she couldn’t put her family first. The venture was short-lived – after a year and a half, she sold the restaurant. She is proud to have created something that has since provided opportunities for other business owners who are newcomers.

She returned to wholesale and attended local events with her food.

Ly was winding down her business when the pandemic hit and Hollie moved back home. The two decided to offer cooking classes on Zoom and at local farms. They also created wonton soup kits filled with all the tools and ingredients needed to make the dish at home. Hollie made a website for her mom and helps with digital marketing. The pandemic regulations put a hold on in-person classes but they hope to start up again soon (goldphoenixasianfoods.com).

This article is the third in a March-long series contributed by The Immigrant Welcome Centre’s Welcoming Communities Coalition that shares the experiences of newcomer entrepreneurs in the Comox Valley. The Coalition is funded by Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC). Listen to more of Phuong (Tania) Ly’s story at holdingheritage.com or download the episode from Holding Heritage wherever you get your podcasts.

banking job to focus on her enterprise while caring for their children.

All this time, she harboured a dream: to open an authentic Chinese-Vietnamese restaurant in Courtenay. While Ly built her food distribution business she collected restaurant equipment. One day she noticed a restaurant was closing on 29th Street and the space was available.

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# BUSINESS

Email: editor@comoxvalleyrecord.com

## Business owner growing a life in Canada

SUBMITTED  
Black Press

Many people who are arriving in Courtenay for the first time drive north along Highway 19.

They exit onto the Comox Valley Parkway and are welcomed by the sight of a Snowbird jet in permanent flight atop a pedestal at the Vancouver Island Visitor Centre.

The jet is the focal point, but the next time you visit we ask you to take a moment to enjoy the manicured lawns and tended gardens that frame the monument and visitor building.

Juan Calero and his small team care for these plants, grasses, and soil. As the owner/operator of HJ Landscaping, he also tends to landscaping at the Crown Isle Shopping Centre and for other businesses in the Valley.

His journey to working in the soil here began in the soil in Nicaragua, where Calero grew up on his family's carrot farm. To understand why Calero left requires at least a brief understanding of the Nicaraguan Revolution and Contra War. In 1979, the Sandinista National Liberation Front had taken power from the Somoza family that had ruled by dictatorship for decades. Then-U.S. President Ronald Reagan saw the Sandinistas as a front for the Soviet Union and the spread of communism, and provided support to an armed counter-revolutionary group known as the Contras.

Calero explains that the U.S. saw Latin Amer-



Juan Calero is the owner/operator of HJ Landscaping; he also tends to landscaping at the Crown Isle Shopping Centre and for other businesses in the Valley. Photo submitted

ica as part of their backyard. When he was a teen, he says, his family lost the use of their farmland due to the conflict. If one side decided they wanted to stay at a family's farm, he says, "[You] have no choice - they have to stay there, they have the guns ... It was tough."

Tens of thousands of people died during the Contra War, including Calero's older brother who worked for the Nicaraguan government. "When I left the country I promised I'd never

go back," Calero says.

In the mid-90s and in his mid-20s, he obtained his passport and flew to Mexico, and then on to Texas with the help of his sister, who worked with lawyers to arrange their immigration. His sister settled in the U.S. but he decided to continue to Canada at the suggestion of an employee at a Houston immigration centre.

"I am grateful to be here because the system, at least if you do anything bad, you have the right to a hearing. Over there if the government decides to put you in jail, that's it, you're done," Calero says.

He landed in Saskatchewan and moved to Calgary shortly after (Saskatchewan is "beautiful in the summer" but too cold in the winter) and landed his first job trimming trees around high voltage power lines. He took some courses at a college on tree pruning and safety for the job.

After a few years of gaining experience in tree trimming, he decided to start a landscaping business. He and his family eventually resettled in Vancouver where he raised three daughters (all continue to live in Vancouver, and attend or graduated from the University of B.C.). About 10 years ago, a landscaping client told Calero he had retired and had a Denman Island oyster farm lease for sale. Calero had visited the Comox Valley before and found Island life appealing. He decided to go for it, and he and

his partner moved to the Island.

He ran the oyster farm from 2012 to 2014 but realized labour-intensive shellfish farming is a young person's job - or at least a job for a spry back and shoulders. He sold it and went back to landscaping, staying in the Valley and starting HJ Landscaping.

"I like to be outside," he says matter-of-factly.

He says he receives most of his business through referrals and word-of-mouth, forgoing a heavy online presence (HJ Landscaping can be reached at 250-898-7545). Approaching 60 and with three employees, he is content with where his business is at although he also notes that it can be a challenge to find new employees willing to do hard physical work.

When asked if he has any advice for newcomers to the Valley, Calero says, "It's a good city to start ... I like the people here. If you work hard and learn, anything - whatever you want to do, you can do [it]."

*This article is the fourth in a March-long series contributed by The Immigrant Welcome Centre's Welcoming Communities Coalition that shares the experiences of newcomer entrepreneurs in the Comox Valley. The coalition is funded by Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC). Listen to more of Juan Calero's story at holdingheritage.com or download the episode from Holding Heritage wherever you get your podcasts.*

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# Floral farm blooms with creativity, science and community

SUBMITTED  
Black Press

To find one's passions and align them with your day-to-day work is a lifelong dream for many.

A few years ago, Thanu Eagalle took a bold leap and combined her passions to create the business Wild Bee Florals, intersecting her interests in community, collaboration, art, regenerative agriculture and even insect diversity.

*“I think it was going to the [Comox Valley] Farmers’ Market and eating this chocolate almond croissant that just sealed the deal for me. I just felt so welcomed by everyone I had a conversation with.”*

THANU EAGALLE

Eagalle grows seasonal flowers in Courtenay that she sells in bouquets and arrangements through floral subscriptions, events, and community partnerships. She began the venture part-time in Vancouver, growing and selling flower subscriptions and flowers at pop-up markets while working for a non-profit and completing a graduate

program in museum education (her second; the first was in evolutionary biology).

“Eventually, what led me back to flowers was burnout,” she says. Eagalle set a goal to spend more time with flowers. When she lost her job during the pandemic, she and her partner Aaron, a land surveyor, decided to move to



Thanu Eagalle of Wild Bee Florals. Melanie Orr Photography

the Comox Valley where she could focus on Wild Bee Florals full-time (wildbeeflorals.com).

“I think it was going to the [Comox Valley] Farmers’ Market and eating this chocolate almond croissant that just sealed the deal for me,” Eagalle says with a laugh. “I just felt so welcomed by everyone I had a conversation

with.”

The embrace they received from people in the Valley is something she hopes every new resident receives. One of her neighbours generously allows Eagalle to grow flowers on their land to bring the total growing area to an acre - gratitude for which Eagalle has a difficult time

putting into words. They are working together to create a space in Dove Creek to welcome their local community.

The Welcoming Communities Coalition asked her about the welcoming she received when she moved to Ontario as a child with her younger sister and parents. Her family left Sri Lanka in 1999 in the midst of what would be a decades-long civil war. She says it wasn't uncommon to hear about bombings, or to see images of violence and death in the local news. Her mom's workplace, the Central Bank of Ceylon, was bombed twice before they emigrated.

As a nine-year-old, Eagalle says she was hyper-focused on her lunches and the aromas that were unfamiliar to many Canadian schoolchildren. “I was very interested in Lunchables.”

Her parents applied for jobs in their fields, but there were challenges - they spoke English, but with an accent. She clearly remembers her dad shaving his beard before job interviews - the dark humour within the Sri Lankan community being that with a beard, the men would be mistaken for terrorists.

One of the ways in which her parents helped Eagalle and her sister settle into Ontario was to prioritize fun family outings on the weekends to explore their new country and home.

“They were able to show my sister and I these different experiences - show us the world in a way - by working really intensely.”

Her family maintained a connection with Sri Lanka by visiting every four years or so. In 2016, Eagalle's parents sold their home in Ontario and bought land in central Sri Lanka where they have built an eco-resort.

Continued on Page A45

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# Store connects couple with wider Filipino community

Part of a series that shares the experiences of newcomer entrepreneurs in Campbell River

Contributed by the Welcoming Communities Coalition

The JRV Filipino Asian Store has been open for only 16 months, but its owners are finding that their business venture is more than just a store – it's a way to connect the Filipino community in Campbell River.

Rica Briones and Ivan Ragonot started the JRV Filipino Asian Store in June 2021, in the midst of the pandemic. While they have both lived here for 11 and eight years, respectively, running a store that offers specialized Filipino snacks and dried goods has introduced them to countless others who also emigrated from the Philippines.

As a result, Briones has found herself taking on an organizing role in the Campbell River Filipino-Canadian Cultural Association, which became inactive around the start of the pandemic. She and Ragonot gathered friends to create a float for this year's Campbell River Rotary Canada Day Parade (their "Smile" float was awarded 1st place) and started a new group Facebook page at the beginning of July.

Briones' social media skills are partly what led to the idea for the JRV Filipino Asian Store. She was selling Filipino-made bags online while working as a scheduler for a care facility with a toddler at home. When she was asked to return to the office as COVID-19 restrictions lifted, she and Ragonot brainstormed ways in which she could continue to work with their children by her side (now four-months-old and three-years-old). They knew that many people, such as themselves, traveled to Vancouver for imported Asian food not readily available on the Island, and the store was born.

Briones came to Canada from the Philippines in 2011, following in the footsteps of her mother. Ragonot was sponsored by a local

Tim Horton's to work at the food counter. The two came from separate regions of the Philippines but connected through mutual friends at Briones' 25th birthday party.

Both happen to be IT (information technology) graduates, but their credentials are not recognized in Canada. Briones' first job in Campbell River was with Home Hardware as a cashier and she was soon promoted to accountant. Both eventually moved to the field of health care as care aides – this has inspired Ragonot to pursue a nursing career while Briones focuses on the store.

The shop on 13th Avenue at Greenwood Street carries hard-to-find food items from the Philippines as well as a few products from countries such as China, Thailand, Vietnam, and India. Briones posts on their Facebook page (facebook.com/jorivcollections) when a new shipment is coming in, which often leads to an immediate sell-out of dried snacks and brands like Magnolia and Selecta ice cream.

The pandemic provided its own unique challenges to running a new small business, including sourcing products and knowing if they would arrive on time to having to adjust prices due to increasing costs.

"It's a bit of a roller coaster ride," Ragonot says.

He adds that the support from the community has been overwhelming.

"We're really happy about it," he says. They dream of one day opening a large Asian grocery store in Campbell River.

When asked if they have any advice to newcomers settling on the Island, the couple says to focus on your dreams but remember to rest.

"And build connections, too," Ragonot says.

They remember when the Campbell River Filipino-Canadian Cultural Association would host huge gatherings for Christmas, New Year's Eve, and the Philippines'



Rica Briones, Ivan Ragonot and one of their children pose in front of their store. Photo contributed

Independence Day (June 12).

To continue to help bring the Filipino community together, Briones, Ragonot, and friends hosted a summer picnic at Miracle Beach in August. After, many people expressed their gratitude on the group's Facebook page for a "very happy and memorable" event.

Said one person, "The warm friendly camaraderie of everyone made us withstand the cold weather we had. God bless us all."

This article is one of four in an October series contributed by The Immigrant Welcome Centre's Welcoming Communities Coalition that shares the experiences of newcomer entrepreneurs in Campbell River. The Coalition is funded by Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC). Listen to more of Rica Briones and Ivan Ragonot's story at holdingheritage.com or



The Campbell River Filipino-Canadian Cultural Association's "Smile" float won first place at the 2022 Canada Day parade in Campbell River. Photo contributed

download the episode from Holding Heritage wherever you get your podcasts. Read

the introduction to the series on the Mirror's website and read the final stories in The

Mirror's upcoming magazine, The People Project.



# In Pursuit of Art

Photographer leaves Damascus to pursue art safely in Campbell River

Contributed by the Welcoming Communities Coalition

**I**n Damascus, Syria, simply carrying a camera in public could be perceived as an act of rebellion.

As an aspiring photographer, Sarmad Almouallem was approached by the military nearly every time he went out in the streets with his camera. To keep his equipment, he often had to offer money or delete his digital photo card.

Syria has been in the midst of a complex and violent civil war since 2011 that has displaced millions of people. Some areas are controlled by the regime, such as Damascus, while other parts of the country are held by Syrian rebels, jihadists, or Kurdish forces.

Almouallem was born and raised in Syria, and had obtained a degree in electrical engineering at Damascus University. He worked at his father's electrical and mechanical engineering company on projects such as a thousand-bed hospital, but his true passion was photography.

"Photography was the medium that I felt I can be connected to and communicate with other people and show them my view," he says.

Almouallem says it was difficult to comprehend why citizens could carry guns in the streets but not cameras.

"I was so focused on trying to do photography and produce art, but it was so hard. I love street photography and it was so hard to carry a camera in the street."

In 2013, he decided to leave Syria for the United States, landing in New York with a visitor visa. His parents stayed behind and, as an only child, he changed his mind and returned to be with his family. A dear friend and photography mentor asked him to reconsider his decision.

"I was like, if we left – the young generation – we have the ability to rebuild ... And he was like, 'It's not going well, you should leave,'"

In 2015, Almouallem went to the oceanside with friends to camp and say goodbye once again. He recalls enjoying the beautiful mountain landscape and that time on the beach and with loved ones while across the water bombs fell and smoke billowed into the sky.

Leaving a second time, he says, took an emotional toll.

“Emotionally and mentally, it was hard on me because I don’t know what’s going to happen. I don’t know if I am going to get sent back. I don’t know if I’m going to see family and parents and friends again.”

Almouallem traveled to the United States by way of Lebanon and Dubai. He made his way across the U.S. and into Canada in September 2015, headed for Campbell River where his godfather lived and applying for status as a protected person.

After a few months living with his godfather, Almouallem managed to bring his dogs over from Syria, found a place to rent on Quadra Island, and took a job as a dishwasher at Heriot Bay Inn. Almouallem speaks Arabic, some French, and English – in Syria, he taught himself English by watching English-speaking comedians and listening to English-language music.

And, importantly, he was able to safely pursue his art ([instagram.com/sarmadalmouallem](https://www.instagram.com/sarmadalmouallem)). He considered moving to Victoria to seek opportunities as a photographer there, but first decided to attend a contemporary Syrian art show at the Campbell River Art Gallery where he met his now-partner. On the day of their first date, he was also offered a job at Photo Tech Foto Source developing film. Needless to say, he decided to put roots down in Campbell River.

Almouallem’s responsibilities at Photo Tech Foto Source increased, and soon he was managing the store when the owners were away. When they decided to retire, Almouallem “rolled the dice, took a risk” and bought the business in February 2021.

He says the support from the community is why the shop is still standing, with residents willing to wait longer for their equipment to arrive from a small local business.

A few years ago, he also successfully brought his parents to Campbell River, and moved off Quadra Island to be closer to them. He says the transition has been more difficult for his parents. They have found the lack of a Syrian community isolating, whereas Almouallem wanted to settle in a community where he could immerse himself in Canadian culture.

“I wanted to try on my own with the people around me,” he says.

Last year, he was appointed the Walter Morgan Studio’s first artist-in-residence by the Campbell River Arts Council and, on June 29, he took his Canadian citizenship test at The Immigrant Welcome Centre. Currently, Almouallem is working on a photography project with a colleague involving a 1932 four-by-five camera with a modern Polaroid back that they plan to show at the store.

When asked if he has advice for other newcomers settling in Campbell River, Almouallem says, “Love it and enjoy the ride. Try your best to share love and respect.”

*This article is one of four in an October series contributed by The Immigrant Welcome Centre’s Welcoming Communities Coalition that shares the experiences of newcomer entrepreneurs in Campbell River. The Coalition is funded by Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC). Listen to more of Sarmad Almouallem’s story at [holdingheritage.com](https://www.holdingheritage.com) or download the episode from Holding Heritage wherever you get your podcasts.*



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“Photography was the medium that I felt I can be connected to and communicate with other people and show them my view

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# Inspired

by a father to  
experience the world

Contributed by the  
Welcoming Communities Coalition

When Taj Singh was nine years old, his father left their home in Punjab, India, to work in the United States, hoping to create a more secure financial future for his children.

His dad worked at 7-Eleven stores in the U.S. while Singh grew up on the family farm with his mom and five siblings.

"He always had a dream for his kids to go to better schools and to have better studies."

One day, a regular customer asked his father if he aspired to own his own 7-Eleven. This conversation lit a spark and eventually he did come to own one of the franchises. Singh says his

father, who has traveled to many countries, is the inspiration for his decision to experience the world. When his dad sold the store and returned to India, Singh was 19 and preparing to leave for post-secondary school in New Zealand in 2009.

"We kind of had seven to eight months of time," he says, which they spent sharing stories. "It was a lot to catch up for him and I think he did a great job."

While Singh already had a bachelor's degree in computer science, he decided to study business administration in New Zealand. His younger brother and an older sister came along, and



he fondly recalls them being “a great team.” After a few odd jobs while studying, Singh started working at Subway Restaurants where he became a manager, and was often sent to different stores by the owners to help get them off the ground. With that experience, he decided to apply to immigrate to Canada, landing in Prince George in the middle of winter.

“The day I landed in Prince George it was minus 28. And I got out of the plane, I’m looking at my hands – I’m like what is going on, because nobody told me it was that cold,” he recalls.

Singh took a job at Staples as a sales consultant and was quickly

promoted to the tech department and then to a management position. After six months he was asked if he would like another promotion to a position at the Staples in Campbell River.

“I had never heard of it. I was like, how’s the weather up there? They said, it’s great. It’s like, when do I move?” he says with a laugh.

He arrived not knowing a single person, but found the team at Staples to be incredibly welcoming.

“I was the only Indian actually working in the store at the time and they asked me questions about my religion and about myself or my country. I was just so over the moon, actually, to tell them because I am a proud Indian.”

It was November 2017, and there were few people from India residing in Campbell River. Singh met other Indian families and stayed connected to his culture through the local Sikh temple.

Singh’s love of food led him back to the restaurant industry. Today, he is the proud owner the Pita Pit on Shoppers Row, one of three on Vancouver Island, which he opened in November 2021 with his partner Shaylene Harry. He recalls being introduced to the franchise in New Zealand more than 10 years ago when a Pita Pit opened down the road from where he worked. He was impressed by the creativity, healthy ingredients, and having the opportunity to influence the menu.

The couple has been at the store seven days a week for 14 to 15 hours a day since opening ten months ago to ensure a successful launch. Harry had to work while Singh attended his Canadian citizenship ceremony on July 2, surprising him when he came into work with a Canadian flag and cake. The pair likes to explore through cooking and trying new menu combinations while respecting cultural dietary needs (such as keeping meat and vegetarian grills separate). One of their goals is to create a menu item that ends up on Pita Pit’s Creation Nation menu across the chain. He estimates that about 60 per cent of their customers are regulars.

Singh and Harry now employ a team of 12, including one of Singh’s sisters who moved to Campbell River this past summer. His young niece has enthusiastically learned to wear a hair net and ensures the chip racks and drink machines are fully stocked.

He continues to reach out to his dad for business advice, saying, “He is the best advisor I could ask for.”

Both his parents continue to be supportive.

“Dad will ask, how is business going? Mom will ask, hey, did you eat today?”

On opening day back in November, his father wasn’t able to be there so he texted Singh in the early hours of the morning - and told him he was living his dad’s dream. It was an emotional moment for Singh. “I took a screen shot of that.”

*This article is one of four in an October Newcomer Entrepreneur series contributed by The Immigrant Welcome Centre’s Welcoming Communities Coalition that shares the experiences of newcomer entrepreneurs in Campbell River. The Coalition is funded by Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC). Listen to more of Taj Singh’s story at [holdingheritage.com](https://www.holdingheritage.com) or download the episode from Holding Heritage wherever you get your podcasts.*