

# Getting by giving

Mark Persaud landed in Toronto from Guyana homeless with \$80 in his pocket. Today he's a lawyer running a peace organization. He accomplished it all, he says, through giving back to the community.



## Mark Persaud

Turning adversity into a rewarding experience has become a way of life for Mark Persaud. In 1983, during a time of civil unrest, Persaud and thousands of others fled to Canada from his home country of Guyana. He was allowed to leave with \$200 Guyanese, which amounted to \$80.59 Canadian.

Since he was not permitted to work or receive social assistance, he found himself homeless. The winter of 1983-84 was a particularly cold one and he was on the street for months before someone saw him shivering and insisted he go to the Scott Mission for help. Many shelters are filled with those with psychological and alcohol problems and can be frightening to refugees, says Persaud, but he was so cold that he put aside his trepidation.

At the Scott Mission, he met Eileen Brown, who provided him with a jacket and food. She dedicated herself to finding ways to help the young Persaud overcome the factors that were preventing him from integrating. Years later, when asked why she had paid particular attention to Persaud, Brown told him "because a lot of people I see have given up on life but I saw that you still had that spark."

Thankful for the help he had received, Persaud wanted to give back to the community. Don Groff of the United Church invited him to set up a resource for refugees, thus beginning the Toronto United Church Emergency Refugee Relief (TUCERR), a transition home for refugee claimants giving assistance, counselling and shelter.

"This was one of the most rewarding things in my life," says Persaud. "I felt like I was making a contribution while gaining a lot of experience and exposure." Persaud encourages all new Canadians to give back and join mainstream volunteer organizations. He believes that working with people from many walks of Canadian life, particularly when they are focused on a common goal, is a terrific way to feel like you are a part of Canadian society.

**The United Church began to fund the TUCERR and Persaud became a paid employee, but he gave much of his pay to his clients who had less than he did. But he wanted to do more for the refugees he helped.**

**Inspired by the lawyers who assisted the refugees through TUCERR, he started studying part-time at York University and, funded by grants, scholarships and loans, Persaud obtained his law degree at Osgoode Hall.**

**Eleven years into his law career, and in response to 9/11, Persaud began the Canadian International Peace Project (CIPP).**

**Twelve groups were involved in its creation, including several faithbased groups (Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist and Sikh), a school and a peace organization.**

**The CIPP “seeks to promote mutual respect and greater understanding among Canadians and people around the world of different religious, racial, ethnic, linguistic, national, cultural or other definable backgrounds.” It encourages Canadians from all backgrounds to work together to promote peace, development and security locally, nationally and internationally. A prime example of Canadian pluralism, one of the CIPP’s first endeavours was to restore a war-damaged mosque in Afghanistan.**

**Now known as the Canadian International Peace and Development Centre, the mosque is now a literacy school for children.**

**Current CIPP projects include working with Canadian International Scientific Exchange Program (CISEPO), a volunteer organization associated with Mount Sinai Hospital and the University of Toronto, to promote health issues in the Middle East. There is a particular focus at the moment on the health and welfare of Palestinian children. As well, the Somali government has asked Persaud and the CIPP to help persuade the Canadian government to assist with a number of issues. Persaud has used his connections and expects there will be an announcement regarding aid to Somalia this spring.**

**Although Persaud’s extended family has settled in New York, he has chosen to remain here. “I am passionate about Canada,” he says. “This is the country I want to serve.”**

**In January, Persaud was appointed as a special advisor on immigration issues to the Conservative party (*sic*), after serving two terms on the Liberal’s standing committee on multiculturalism. In his new role, he is listened to and treated respectfully and many of his recommendations are already being worked on, he says. These include the eradication of the landing fee (the Conservatives have already slashed this in half), which Persaud sees as an unnecessary burden on incoming families who are, in fact, future taxpayers. Another issue of extreme**

**importance to Persaud is the recognition of foreign credentials. People are stripped of their pride and dignity, he says, when their qualifications, talents and experience are overlooked, causing demoralization, family tensions, and other harsh manifestations. As well as being committed to these Canadian initiatives, Persaud is “fascinated by other parts of the world.” He observes that, “many immigrants come here and remain emotionally attached to their country of origin, sending all of their aid to their home country. I am concerned about all parts of the world.” He has never returned to Guyana, but is thinking about seeing it now and trying to reconnect.**

**But for now, Persaud remains focused on promoting peace and acceptance at a local level. “We have not experienced the same level of turmoil as France, England or the U.S.,” he says, “but we cannot afford to be complacent. We have to put more emphasis on tolerance and the integration of our various communities and ensure we don’t create ethnic or religious silos.”**

**When asked how this can be accomplished, Persaud replies, “There are a lot of good organizations involved in important work and we must actively support them. All people must be respected but there is a corresponding responsibility to integrate. This can be done by looking beyond race, religion and nationalism and reaching out.”**

**Source: Lynda Spark, The Canadian Immigrant Magazine, April, 2007 Issue**