

# Opening doors

*Nova Scotia is becoming more proactive in its effort to increase immigration. To those involved in helping immigrants settle, it's a welcome initiative*

by JOE FITZGERALD



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At MISA, Nabiha Atallah (left) and her colleagues, Khaleda Alkhoraibet (center) and Ljiljana Connellan, help newcomers to Nova Scotia integrate into the business community.

*“Nova Scotia is at a point in its history where the contributions made by immigrants will be critical to our future economic, social, and cultural development.”*

— *A Framework for Immigration: A Discussion Paper*, August 2004

The above is the opening statement of a document issued by the Province of Nova Scotia last summer. Its sentiments are echoed by Nabiha Atallah, the manager of immigrant business development at the Metropolitan Immigrant Settlement

Association (MISA) in Halifax. “We’re at a crossroads,” she says. “This is a great initiative, and I hope it gets support from the public in order to make it a reality, because this isn’t a government issue. Everybody is a stakeholder in immigration. Every person who lives in Nova Scotia has a role to play.”

Atallah’s family emigrated from Egypt when she was seven. She grew up in Canada, but as a young adult went back to Egypt to teach elementary school. While there she met some Canadians who were

teaching English as a second language (ESL). Intrigued, Atallah began teaching ESL in Egypt. She got married, returned to Canada with her husband in 1987, and did ESL postgraduate work at the University of British Columbia.

After teaching in various places around Canada, in 1995 Atallah’s husband’s work as associate professor in Dalhousie University’s faculty of medicine brought the couple to Halifax, where she found it difficult to find work in her field. “I was

really focused on looking for an ESL opportunity,” she says, “but when I hadn’t found a job after six months, I became a little more flexible.”

While living in Winnipeg, Atallah had developed a program for Red River College on business English for immigrant adults. When a position to manage what was then called the Immigrant Entrepreneur Orientation Program at MISA became available in Halifax in 1996, she applied and got the job. Today the program is called Immigrant Business Development Services; it helps immigrants who want to start businesses or are in business and need support. “A lot of the work at MISA is

gives the employer a no-risk opportunity to try out a newcomer,” says Atallah.

Over the years, the annual average number of immigrants coming to Nova Scotia has been around 1,500, but in the 1990s that number doubled. “In the mid-1990s, almost 3,500 immigrants came annually, largely as a result of the Gulf War and because of good marketing done by private consultants and by the province at the time,” says Atallah. “But a lot of those people who came here didn’t find enough support, enough community, enough opportunity, so a lot of them left.” This was at the same time that Nova Scotia’s immigrant-intake numbers went down.

something as seemingly straightforward as getting a line of credit can frustrate newcomers because, regardless of their assets, it takes a long time for them to establish a credit history.

In July of 2002 a whole new set of immigration requirements were created at the federal level, such as more education and work experience, that made it tougher to get into Canada. Still, even though immigration is largely seen as a federal issue, provinces now are taking initiatives to entice people to settle and start businesses. Atallah says those coming to Nova Scotia now are highly educated and have good language skills.



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— Nabiha Atallah, MISA

bridging and helping people connect with the mainstream community,” says Atallah.

Nova Scotia’s population is growing older and declining in numbers; this demographic trend has led to more value and interest in immigration. MISA has been integral in helping new immigrants settle and contribute to life in Canada. The organization provides a full range of services for all categories of immigrants, including reception and orientation for government-assisted refugees; language assessment; and employment and job-search procedures such as networking, resumé building, and understanding employer expectations.

The New Beginnings Program arranges unpaid job placements that offer immigrants with work experience in a particular field a chance to do their line of work in a Canadian setting, show what they can do, and get Canadian experience and references. “It

The two main factors an immigrant considers before settling in an area are economic opportunity and community. Some groups, such as the Middle Eastern, Korean, and European communities, are established and more attractive to newcomers of those backgrounds, while others, most recently from China, are only beginning to build a base in Nova Scotia. In the mid-1990s, many immigrants arriving in the province were business people under the federal government’s entrepreneur program, but that trend has changed.

“We’ve seen a drastic drop in that [trend],” says Atallah, “partly because the experience of those people was that it was tough to start a business here, and partly because the government tightened that federal program and the requirements are a lot tougher now.” Another obstacle facing business immigrants is market size. Even

In 1998 other Canadian provinces had begun bilateral negotiations with the federal government to take more control of immigration locally. In 2002 Nova Scotia signed such an agreement, the Nova Scotia Nominee Program; it was the first significant provincial initiative. “It’s taken a while to get going and it’s narrower than many other provincial programs,” says Atallah. She describes this year’s release of a framework on immigration by the province, which has just gone through a public consultation process under Ron Heisler, the director of Immigration and Settlement in Nova Scotia, as more significant. “I think the consultation was done well and the document hit a lot of the important points,” she says. “To propose a strategy for Nova Scotia to be more proactive in the immigration has been overdue, and it’s a really good move. ■