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CITY



PAT MCGRATH, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN

Recipients of the annual Ottawa Community Immigrant Services Organization Community Awards of Excellence, include, from left, Bishop Rudolf McEwan Sr., Moiz Lakhani, Abid Jan and Dr. Qais Ghanem.

Highlighting success stories

Community awards recognize contributions of immigrants to Ottawa

BY LOUISA TAYLOR

Sometimes it takes a pair of fresh eyes to get to the root of a problem and come up with a solution so simple, you wonder why no one was doing it.

That was Abid Jan. A refugee from Pakistan, Jan arrived in Ottawa in 2004 and started working as a community development officer for the South East Ottawa Community Health Centre.

It was his job to help residents in low-income neighbourhoods improve community life. He soon began to wonder why it was so hard to get anyone involved.

"The bottom line was the residents had so much fear, and a lack of trust, and there was no co-ordination of services," says Jan. "Even the police and Ottawa Community Housing security officers weren't co-ordinating."

After a lot of talking and listening and researching development models from around the world, Jan came up with a simple but successful approach that goes something like this: Don't tell communities what they need, and don't just ask them, either. Help residents talk to each other. Support them as they take a hard look at their neighbourhood and come up with a list of their own priorities, then give them the tools to make things happen.

Get the people who work for the service agencies — the police, Ottawa Community Housing, the United Way, and others — out from behind their desks to sit around a table with residents. Start a permanent conversation that focuses on what's working and what's not and how to fix things before they become a problem.

Instead of simply getting more police officers to patrol a neighbour-

hood struggling with gangs and drugs, the committee finds out what residents care about. They might want the extra police officers, but they also might want advice on setting up a tenants' association to give residents a stronger voice, or administrative support for a youth group's efforts to build a new playground.

"Abid was here every Friday for six months, just meeting people and getting to know their concerns. He was very gentle, never intimidating," says Sylvie Manser, executive director of the Banff Avenue Community House.

Once the "No Communities Left Behind" approach was implemented as a pilot project in Banff-Ledbury, the result was "total transformation," Manser says.

Residents reported feeling much safer and more connected to their neighbourhood, while agencies running programs had a better grasp of the needs and felt their efforts were hitting their targets.

The results were so significant that in 2007, when the city started looking for a new way to deliver services, it adopted Jan's plan. It's now the Community Development Framework, and it's being applied to four more neighbourhoods, with the aim of putting it into action in a total of 14 across Ottawa.

For this work, Jan is one of four recipients of the Ottawa Community Immigrant Services Organization (OCISO) Community Awards of Excellence, to be handed out on Thursday, March 11.

He is one of two people being honoured in the category "Heroes Among Us," which recognizes people born outside of Canada who have overcome their own struggles to help other immigrants and refugees.

"In the neighbourhoods we're working in, there are sometimes more than 90 per cent immigrants, and it's really satisfying to see the success stories coming out of these communities," says Jan.

OCISO executive director Hamdi Mohamed says the awards began last year as a way to highlight the contributions immigrants make to the city.

"We had an overwhelmingly positive reaction, so we knew we had to do it again," says Mohamed.

The second recipient of the Heroes Among Us award is Bishop Rudolf McEwan Sr., who started the first black church in Ottawa in 1969 in a house just off Merivale Road. His congregation quickly grew, and the Jamaican-born pastor made his church a place of support for many immigrants, especially young women who came to Ottawa as domestic workers.

OCISO's Youth Leadership Award will go to eight-year-old Moiz Lakhani, a Connaught Public School student who showcases South Asian culture with musical performances at community events. Moiz, who dreams of being a heart surgeon and an Olympian, is also an avid fundraiser for World Partnership Walk.

Dr. Qais Ghanem, an Ottawa neurologist, will receive the Media Leadership Award, in recognition of Dialogue on Diversity, his weekly show on CHIN Radio. Begun in 2006, the show aims to educate Canadians about other cultures by showcasing their history and traditions.

"It's important to break down barriers between people," says Ghanem, who also founded Potlucks for Peace, which brings Jews and Arabs together for discussion about the Middle East.

The awards will be presented at the OCISO awards gala on Thursday, March 11. For tickets or information, call 613-725-5671, extension 332, or visit www.ociso.org.