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Matchmaker

DON CURRY
Special to The Nugget



It was hot and humid for the interview and K'Sah Woodley wore a sweater. "I'm cold all the time," she says. The only North Bay resident from Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, she is used to 30 C temperatures almost year-round. "When it gets below 30 we put on a jacket."

That is usually in December. She says they have two seasons there — the rainy season and the hot season — and it's still hot in the rainy season.

K'Sah — pronounced Kay-sa — nevertheless loves North Bay. She first became intrigued with North Bay when someone from Nipissing University did a college fair presentation for her college in Collaqua on the small Caribbean island, situated south of Saint Lucia, east of Barbados and north of Grenada. The island's population is about 120,000. She wanted to attend university in a smaller city and Nipissing's promise of small classes and lower fees lured her here.

She flew to Toronto, spent one day there, visiting Wal-Mart to stock up for North Bay, and took the train North.

That was four years ago.

She graduated this spring from the gender studies and social justice program and immediately took a one-year contract position as youth host co-ordinator for Big Brothers Big Sisters of North Bay and District.

"I was perfect for this job because I am an immigrant who went through the process, and I'm still going through it," she says. "I can understand where they're coming from." She received a post-graduate work permit and is now working toward permanent resident status.

She is responsible for matching immigrant young people, ages eight through 24, with a volunteer mentor, and for organizing group activities to get youths involved and active in North Bay. She's currently working with young people from Cuba, Trinidad and Tobago, Thailand, Congo, Korea and Japan.

She hopes her contract will be renewed with further funding from Citizenship and Immigration Canada.

"I want to stay in North Bay," she says.

She has friends from Saint Vincent living in Toronto and they are urging her to move there. But she is not interested.

She tried to boost the Saint Vincent population in North Bay when her cousin came here with the intention of attending Nipissing University. But after orientation week she headed home, saying it was too cold.

K'Sah is a huge booster of the university, saying she got to know her professors well because of the small class sizes. She says there was always a friendly person to talk to in the international student office when she had a concern.

She organizes activities for newcomer youth such as going to CFB North Bay to use the gym and pool, visit the waterfront, take a bus tour of the city, or enjoy an activities night.

She says learning English is the No. 1 priority for the older youth, while it isn't such a problem for the younger ones.

"Working with a mentor really helps improve their English," she says.

Mentors have to be more than 18 years old and undergo a police check. She said some parents are concerned about their children being matched with a stranger, but often that anxiety lifts as they become more familiar with the program. Parents are invited to attend group activities, and that helps the integration process.

K'Sah works closely with the North Bay and District Multicultural Centre's host program, and once a month her clients attend the English conversation circles at the North Bay Public Library. She also attends the monthly women's brunch, to meet and network with other newcomers in the city.

Don Curry is executive director of the North Bay and District Multicultural Centre.

On the web: www.nbdmc.ca