
JUNE 8, 2021

Creating a Better Life in Canada

The Canadian immigrant experience



Desiree Raffiek (back left) pictured with her four children on their last day in Guyana. Also pictured, Desiree's great-grandmother (far right) and cousin (far left). Location: Cheddi Jagan International Airport (formerly Timehri airport). July 1975.

Desiree Raffiek immigrated to Canada from Guyana in July 1975, she was 33 years old. The following narrative is based on an interview conducted with Ms. Raffiek on May 19, 2021.

Before I immigrated to Canada my life in Guyana was very happy and nice. Then, everything went crazy because of political uprisings so we decided to leave because my husband and I had four kids and we did not want them to remain there. It took three years [from submitting the paperwork to acceptance]. My hopes for our new life in Canada were to make a better life for my children, me, and my husband.

When we left British Guyana we stopped in Trinidad by using West Indian airlines. Then we switched to use Air Canada airlines when coming into Canada. [I had] mixed feelings during the flight. Things were going through my mind when I was traveling, like asking myself if I was doing the right thing for my family and realizing that I was gonna be with all of my other family members in Canada.

We arrived at Pearson Airport in Toronto. When we arrived we were all sitting in a special room meant for immigrants coming in. They were calling us one at a time and checking us into these different booths for things like passports, immigration papers, and how many kids we had with us. Once they were finished with everything, they asked me if someone was meeting me there and I said yes, my husband was since he had come to Canada about three months before me. After that, they gave me my papers, social insurance cards, and benefits for the kids. Then at the end, they showed me where I had to go.

No one gave me a hard time, it was smooth sailing. Everybody was very helpful and I was quite happy with the response I got from the immigration officers. After I got out of the whole process my cousins, husband, mother, brother, and two sisters were all waiting for me in the airport. When I finally saw them again there was a lot of hugging, kissing, and screaming. I was treated very well in the process of coming to Canada, I have no complaints about it.

Early Days In Canada

There were a lot of new things that we had to get adjusted to in coming to Canada. Like for example, the snow and winters.

I have never seen anything like it before. We had a great time with our first experience in the snow, we got all dressed up and the kids threw snowballs at each other while the rest of the family came over and showed the kids how to make snowmen. My first Christmas in Canada was even better. It was very nice because it was the first time that all members of my family were together again after about 10 years of being apart. Even though in the back of my mind I did miss Christmas in Guyana, I adapted to Christmas in Canada.

Something that surprised me most about Canada when we first got here, was that the majority of people at the time were white. Everywhere you went in stores or restaurants everyone was white. I was surprised because where I came from we had a mixed culture with at least six different races.

I experienced many challenges living in Canada. A few of my biggest challenges in the early years living here were, the changing of the four seasons, how easy it was to get things like groceries in Canada since we never had that much freedom in Guyana. Another thing was racial discrimination. I personally never experienced racial discrimination in Canada, but I know my kids did and that hurt me. Although I told my kids it will pass and it was just because they were new to the country. Once they got into schools and understood the way that the Canadians did things, that discrimination would all pass.

I had a few moments in the first years where I really missed Guyana. I remember crying the first summer I spent here, saying that I wanted to go home. My kids and husband asked me “why, what are you going back to Guyana for, you don’t have anybody in Guyana, everybody is here”. I said to them because I miss it, I miss the people and I’ve been living there for so long. Eventually, my feelings passed as I grew to love Canada.

There were also good things about the early years in Canada. For example, when I was living in Guyana I never worked, I was a stay-at-home mom. After the first year here I got a job and started to bring in my own money. This was a big help for my husband because his wages alone were not the greatest since he was just a factory worker and with four children we needed a second income. Now that I was working we were able to give our kids all the necessities that they needed like food, clothes, schooling, everything was great. I came to Canada to give my children a better life and that's what I ended up doing.

