

## **Ethnicity and Culture**

### **Meeting the Challenges**

BY **Djamila Amellal**, Communications Officer, Communications and Citizen Engagement

*Within its ethnocultural offender programs, the Correctional Service of Canada (CSC) has created positions for intercultural relations officers and ethnocultural community engagement officers. We met with Daniel Amini of Leclerc Institution and Jocelyne Simon of the Montreal Metropolitan District. They talked to us about their work in the institutions and in the community.*

“As a regional intercultural relations officer,” says Daniel Amini in a quiet tone of voice, “I help implement CD 767, *Ethnocultural Offender Programs*, which enables inmates of foreign origin to assert their own culture, and spells out the obligation of operational units and district offices to respond, as far as possible, to their needs.”

### **Inside and Outside the Walls**

In the field, Amini’s job is, among other things, to promote closer relations between offenders and their source communities so that offenders will have support when paroled. Amini makes a constant effort to inform community agencies about offenders in CSC institutions, in order to organize meetings within the walls.

“Such agencies must have a clear mandate that is recognized by the government. I work to build bridges with, for example, the Italian, Arab, Asian and Black communities,” says Amini, his voice full of optimism and determination. “To make this possible, I organize regular workshops, conferences and discussions to which I invite offenders and community partners. You have to help the offender develop trust in the community he is going to return to when he gets out.”

### **Responding to Basic Cultural Needs**

Amini also works to satisfy the basic cultural needs of offenders. In his view, this is a vital part of the CSC mission. “There are dietary requirements. The chaplains, imams and rabbis in the institutions work closely on this with the heads of food services. Language needs must also be met, if offenders are to be able to understand their psychological assessments or their correctional plans, and to maintain contact with the outside world. I provide offenders with free copies of community newspapers in a variety of languages. There are also cultural needs, to the extent that culture and behaviour are inseparable. These needs can vary greatly from culture to culture.”

### **Building Awareness at all Levels**

According to Amini, fulfilling the CSC mission depends on sensitivity at three levels: the staff’s sensitivity to the offenders’ cultures, the offenders’ sensitivity to other offenders’ culture, and the community’s sensitivity to CSC’s mandate. To that end, he has developed an entire course on identity and diversity, which he is ready to give to CSC staff.

“Our job as CSC employees is to make law-abiding citizens out of offenders,” comments Amini. “In practical terms, this means concentrating first on security, then on reintegration. It is essential, therefore, to listen with empathy, to better understand and help offenders. We have to make CSC staff sensitive to the culture of these offenders by, for example, providing thorough training for new recruits.”

Raising awareness among offenders, he says, is a matter of improving their knowledge about each other. “They have to get to know each other. I’m talking here about intercultural knowledge. For that, I organize gatherings and activities during which people talk about their homeland, its culture, its cuisine, and things like that.”

Guy Petit-Clair, Director of the Ville-Marie Area Parole Office, adds: “We know that CSC has commitments and goals in this area, and it is our duty to help achieve them. We have known for years that the ethnic and cultural dimension is going to be an increasingly significant one. We know, too, that the best way of reintegrating these offenders is into their own communities. The Quebec Region has always made a contribution to the maintenance of good relations with community organizations. We have opened the doors even wider by taking part in setting up national and regional ethnocultural advisory committees, and playing a role in their activities. Our efforts in this area are continuing.”

Mr. Amini will have his work cut out for him in the months ahead. In cooperation with colleagues and partners, he is organizing three community forums, one in October with the Greek community, another in November with Latin-American folk, and the third in January with the Muslim population.

### **In the Heart of the Community**

Jocelyne Simon, an ethnocultural community engagement officer, speaks with quiet assurance born of solid experience in her field. She is very familiar with the challenges facing CSC. “My job is to meet with community groups, and by that I mean police, city politicians and representatives of ethnic and cultural communities in order to increase awareness of CSC’s mission,” she says.



Left to right: Jocelyne Simon and Marie-Andrée Cyrenne

She continues: “Moreover, some ethnocultural communities do not like the criminal justice system because of their experiences elsewhere. In their view, it is CSC that has taken their child away. Nor are they familiar with the whole issue of reintegration. A simple term like ‘community assessment’ makes them fearful, and they may slam the door in our face. So it is essential that we project a clearer image of CSC and its mandate. Raising awareness is what I do, and it is needed at every level, because CSC needs these communities.”

Ms. Simon, who joined CSC in 1989, even took a year’s sabbatical to work as a volunteer with young people from ethnic minorities. Marie-Andrée Cyrenne, the Metropolitan Montreal District Director, talks about her colleague’s contribution: “Jocelyne has built bridges with many communities. We have to maintain these alliances and work to create more. During Black History Month, she organized an activity that provided a golden opportunity to raise awareness between CSC representatives and the Haitian community.”

## **The Community Network: A Tremendous Resource for CSC**

Ms. Simon plays a crucial role in relations with community groups, encouraging them to help fulfill CSC's mandate. As Ms. Cyrenne points out, this is the most productive approach because, in the supervision of offenders CSC is dealing with a whole network. "The network takes in the family, the community and the police. CSC needs their support."

She adds: "The presence of many ethnic groups on the Island of Montreal is very much today's reality, and it is reality also in CSC institutions. When we talk about reintegration, we are talking about the guidance and supervision of offenders. This is where the challenge begins for our parole officers [Pos], who absolutely must learn to work with the ethnocultural communities in order to do their job. A PO has to seek the support of the spouse, the family and the community. A PO is an authority figure, however, and is negatively perceived by some ethnocultural communities."

## **Recruitment – A Solution**

It is here that the recruitment of volunteers and employees from such communities becomes important. Recruitment helps build bridges with communities and is the key to developing trust in CSC. "These communities show interest when we approach them and talk about our mandate. We have to cultivate that interest and foster closer relations."

Along the same lines, Ms. Cyrenne adds: "The participation of members of these communities in the discharge of our mission is vital. Recruitment is one means. To recruit people, however, you have to attract them. How do we attract and keep them? There is work to be done, and we are making progress. Employees from these community groups would be a great asset for CSC. Such people become role models."