

**UVic Diversity Writing Contest 2013, Second-Place Fiction Winner (tied)**

**By Andy Stuart**

**Diversity, Equality, and Inclusion**

The path to studying in British Columbia for three students was about as far apart as one could imagine; however what they would discuss would bring them close together in understanding what it means to be diverse, equal and inclusive at the same time.

Saad arrived excited to learn English. He had never been outside of Saudi Arabia before arriving in Victoria. He couldn't have prepared for the culture shock of living in a Canadian homestay. On his first day, after recovering from the fatigue of the long flight, his homestay mother, a stunning woman with beautiful brown hair invited him to join her, while her husband ran at the local track. Saad had never seen a woman wear a low cut tank top, drive the family SUV and while on a walking trail, without her husband, casually say "hello" to passing men.

Antoine was born in the small coastal village of St. Augustin, Quebec. He was still a boy when the province voted, by the narrowest of margins, to remain a part of Canada. Although he was young he would never forget the anger in his father's voice yelling and throwing things at the television while watching separatists argue for a sovereign Quebec. The son of a dedicated and fiercely proud deputy minister in the federal government Antoine had travelled to British Columbia to better his English.

Logan had floated through high school with no real direction. He was raised in Victoria by his maternal grandmother and never really knew his drug addicted parents. Growing up Logan had difficulty at school as he was often picked upon for being poor. College was a turning point but mostly by chance as he found his calling while wandering the hallways when he read a help wanted ad for Canadian cultural tutors.

The three students met every few weeks over the semester to talk about living in Canada. Most of their conversations were light and often spiralled towards the various girls in Saad and Antoine's English program. Every few weeks a new group would start and this gave the conversation life every time they met over coffee.

This week was different. Girls were not on Saad's mind as he walked to meet Antoine and Logan. That week Saad had been given an assignment on the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. While doing research he came across articles discussing Quebec's Charter of Values. This caused a lot of confusion: two Charters, one country, yet they seemed to have very different goals. He was dying to learn more from his Canadian friends. His questions were plenty as his research left him no further

ahead. Saad's starting point was life in Saudi Arabia where a Charter of Rights and Freedoms does not exist.

After saying hello, Saad asked "What does the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms protect?" Antoine and Logan paused as this was much heavier than their usual conversation...finally Logan said "it gives each person the right to be who they are". Antoine added "it is a law, which the courts uphold to make sure the government does not intrude upon individual's lives and prevents the government from discriminating against people, whether it is based upon their gender, race, sexual orientation, or religious belief". "So if I have this right then", said Saad, "it ensures everyone is included no matter how different they are". Both guys nodded in agreement, but not overly sure as they were still pondering the question themselves. Antoine always up on local Quebec news was starting to question how everything he had just said fit with what he had read about the proposed Quebec Charter of Values. Before he could finish his thought Saad asked "what is this Quebec Charter then, I have read it is discriminating against different religious beliefs in Quebec?" Antoine answered, "Well the Quebec government has said that to ensure everyone feels included government employees cannot display or wear any religious symbols, they are trying to be secular, and I guess it is another way of looking at equality and inclusion. If government employees do not have religious items displayed then those they are serving will feel welcome regardless of their faith or lack thereof." Logan responded by asking how such a law could possibly protect the individual choices of Quebecers. Logan pointed out that critics of the law have suggested that forcing a Sikh man to not wear a turban at work or a Muslim woman to not wear a niqab is ethnocentric and not recognizing that these religious symbols are very significant to individuals of certain religious faiths. Antoine added, "Many opposed to the law have noticed that Christian symbols or traditions such as Christmas will not be affected by the new rules and this has caused outrage and questions of the real purpose behind the law." The conversation was interrupted by a girl from the English program who walked into the coffee shop and started chatting with the guys. After the girl said goodbye an unusual silence was present. The silence was the guys thinking about the values of diversity, equality and inclusion. The three finished their coffee, said their good byes and set off in their own direction.

As Saad walked to his homestay he considered the diversity he witnessed in Canada: people of various ethnicities in relationships, class mates who preferred those of the same sex, tattoos and interesting hair styles. Although he still held strong beliefs about male and female roles in society he had now seen first-hand what equality meant. Saad understood inclusion was the acceptance of all people no matter how different they were.

On the bus ride home, Antoine opened the paper and read an article about Nelson Mandela's death. In chronicling Mandela's life one quote that stood out was "for to be free is to not merely cast off one's chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedoms of others." This resonated with Antoine. Mandela fought for equality and inclusion of all people in South Africa. In Quebec to be free the government and people must respect and enhance the freedoms of all Quebecers. This means accepting religious symbols of other faiths, even if it means their face is covered, while working as a government employee.

As Logan rode his bike, madly pedaling along, to his part-time job as a dishwasher he considered the conversation. He figured that inclusion requires diversity. For without diversity, that is the differences between people, inclusion would not be necessary as everyone would be the same. And diversity requires the recognition of equality. Although people can be different if they do not view others as equals they will likely not include them for reasons of superiority or prejudice. After work Logan emailed Saad and Antoine his conclusion: diversity, equality and inclusion cannot exist without all three being present. The three values are interrelated. If someone tries to promote one without the others they will fail.