



BACKGROUND 2022

The Shoe Project Rebuilding Immigrant Women's Lives

The Shoe Project (TSP) is a unique initiative with Canadian writers and theatre people giving immigrant career women the written and spoken skills to succeed. In workshops and through individual coaching, they are given the tools to launch new careers by being trained to write and perform their stories. Now celebrating ten years TSP is the brainchild of novelist Katherine Govier, with help from philanthropist Heather Gardiner (The Sonor Foundation) and The Bata Shoe Museum Director Elizabeth Semmelhack.

The stories they work on are centered on shoes which travel with them always - the shoes that brought them to Canada? What shoes did they leave behind? What shoes do they dream they will wear in their new life?

In fall 2011 the first group met in the lunchroom at the Bata Museum. With Govier's guidance each of the ten members wrote an 600-word memoir of her journey here. Voice coaching was added. The next year performances began-- women immigrants and refugees speaking from the heart in polished English on professional stages. Today The Shoe Project has chapters in eight Canadian cities from Vancouver to Halifax; its participants have performed their stories for thousands. Each story has the emotive power of that personal, yet universal, object the shoe.

It's more than just a writing workshop. There is no project like it in the world. The Shoe Project introduces trained and talented women who have fled war, famine, and persecution to other Canadians- and to each other. Outcomes studies show that participants not only build writing and public speaking skills, they grow in confidence, and bond with their colleagues from around the world and are significantly more job ready.

The Shoe Project maintains a repository of 300 stories of arrival by women from 62 countries who have chosen Canada, and freedom. It grows every day. Workshops, coaching and performances are scheduled in Vancouver, Calgary, Canmore, Edmonton, Toronto, Kingston, Brampton and Windsor in the coming twelve months. Afghani students and women's leaders are joining the project now.

In these days of global turmoil, the sheer number of refugees reaching Canada highlights The Shoe Project's urgency. From Syria, China, Eritrea, Turkey, The Democratic Republic of the Congo, Afghanistan, and other countries, women doctors, judges, teachers, IT professionals, psychologists, artists, students, care workers, activists and journalists land in our cities every month. Government assisted settlement services alone can't help them regain past careers. They need higher fluency, confidence. They need places to fit in and to grow. Novelists like Caroline Adderson, Marina Endicott, Olive Senior, Alissa York, and actor-directors such as Calgary's Denise Clarke and Toronto's Leah Cherniak help them to build networks, and, importantly, to speak out. Committed to hiring its alumnae, The Shoe Project is becoming a national platform for newcomer women.

