

Advocating For Social Justice Around the Globe: A Profile of Patsy George

Patsy George has travelled the world—all the multicoloured souvenirs that adorn her high-rise condo in downtown Vancouver are a testament to her globetrotting ways. “It’s easier to count the countries I haven’t been to, than the ones I have,” she says. “And I bring at least one piece back from each place I go.”

“I have an interest in people, history and culture. Travelling is a great way to learn about people and what we all have in common,” she says. “It’s amazing ... even if you don’t have the same language, you find things in common.”

The social worker and former director of multiculturalism and immigration in B.C. has more time to travel now that she’s retired, but her trips are not just about leisure; her expeditions across the world are often tied into the many volunteer and humanitarian efforts that she has dedicated herself to over the years, including as president of the International Council on Social Welfare Canada. “We would have conferences on things like social policy, unemployment, immigration, poverty and sustainable development,” she says. “We’re all a network of people with similar values and we try to learn from each other.”

George is currently president of the United Nations Association in Canada, Vancouver branch. “Since I retired six years ago, I’ve concentrated on my work on international interests and to engage Canadians to be conscious of Canada as part of a

global community.” Issues like the role of peacekeeping, the exploitation of child soldiers and the HIV/AIDS epidemic in Africa are some of the international matters that she is concerned with.

Advocacy for immigrants, particularly women immigrants, has also been an overriding theme in her life. She served on the National Organization of Immigrant and Visible Minority Women of Canada, and was a founding member of the Pacific Immigrant Resources Society, an immigrant settlement agency that focuses its services on women with preschool children.

George was born in Kochi, in the Kerala state in southern India. “It’s a true social democracy, which has definitely influenced all my thinking,” she says. “It also had a strong matriarchal heritage before European colonization.”

So as a young fearless student, she travelled from India to Ontario in 1960 to attend Carleton University in Ottawa. And when she completed her bachelor’s in psychology and masters in social work, she had the choice (as students did in those days) of returning to India or staying in Canada. “I chose to stay in Canada. That was 46 years ago and I don’t regret it,” she says.

George is certainly an example of what’s possible for an immigrant if given the opportunity to fully integrate and embrace multicultural Canada. But George adds that immigrants themselves must also take charge.

“People misunderstand multiculturalism. They think it means shutting ourselves in little groups. That’s not what it means. It’s about equality, respecting each other’s heritage and cultural beliefs, but believing in democracy and rule of law and leaving

behind evil and negative forces. If anyone comes here not willing to accept the basic beliefs of equality, free speech and gender equality, they have no place here,” she says.

These are all values that George has fought for over the years as a volunteer with various organizations and NGOs that are too numerous to list here. Same goes for her many awards and recognitions, the most recent of which is the esteemed Order of Canada.

But it's not her medals and awards that are prominently showcased in her home; it's her many beloved knickknacks representing cultures from around the world. Perhaps the most eye-catching of all is a collection of doves, which she has arranged in front of floor-to-ceiling windows so that they appear to be almost flying. They are a symbol of freedom and peace, she says.

And perhaps that sums up Patsy George's life's work best.