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It's a Long Drive and Learning Experience

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VICTORIA CROSS

Since she started working at the Multnomah County in 2000, Victoria Cross has worked to link immigrant and refugee employees, as well as immigrant and refugee communities, to Multnomah County programs that serve them.

Born in Russia, Victoria graduated from the Moscow State University of Culture with a B.A. in Library & Information Science, and a minor in Nursing. She was chief librarian for the central library in a large Russian city. She also worked in a joint training center involving the Former Soviet Union, the United States, and various countries of Europe, Asia and Africa. Victoria moved to Oregon in 1998 with her husband, Richard, and her daughter, Olga.

In 2011 Victoria founded, and remains the Chair of, the Multnomah County Employee Resource Group for Immigrants and Refugees. The group's purpose is to identify challenges and opportunities faced by this diverse cohort; advance their knowledge about the American workforce and its culture; assist the group's members in achieving their full potential through career development, celebrations, education, and mutual support; provide Multnomah County with a critical linkage to the diverse communities from which these employees come; and help prepare Multnomah County to meet future needs of this diverse workforce.

In June 2014, her Employee Resource Group won an Achievement Award from National Association of Counties for creating safe space for immigrants and refugees employed by Multnomah County, enabling them to share experiences, support and suggest opportunities to improve their experience in the workforce. The group is the first of its kind in the United States, and it serves as a teaching tool for other counties to increase awareness about immigrant and refugee experiences in a work environment, as well as out in the community.

Victoria Cross was honored with the Robert Phillips Regional Diversity Award at the Northwest Public Employees Regional Diversity Conference, where she was recognized for her pioneering efforts in promoting awareness about the needs of immigrants and refugees in the workplace and her success in founding Multnomah County Employee Resource Group for Immigrants and Refugees.

When most immigrants picture the United States, they think of Manhattan, Las Vegas or Hollywood. Few consider Scappoose, where I eventually landed when I arrived from Russia. When my father visited me, he asked: "Where is America?"

I told him: "This is it."



Like most immigrants, I didn't drive and relied on public transportation. When I got a job in downtown Portland, I had to find a way to make the 20-mile trip each day. If I could find my way from Russia to the United States, I knew I could handle this problem. Eventually, someone suggested I join a carpool. It was a new concept. When my American friends asked me if we had carpools in Russia, I said we did, but called them trains.

The carpool I joined had been founded 10 years earlier. After a phone call, I was invited to join, and on the first day, I stood with my husband on St. Helens Road to wait for a red Ford to arrive and pick me up.

I was nervous when I thought about the 40-minute drive to the city. What would I talk about with these strangers? What if they didn't like me?

And then the car stopped, and the door opened.

"Hi," the driver said, "I am Anne."

My husband suspiciously looked inside the car, kissed me goodbye and let me go. On that first day, it was just the driver and me. Anne was very talkative. Relieved, I just sat and listened. But the next day the whole team went to work, and I met the rest of my carpool.

I knew I was on probation.

The rules were simple: No smoking and you could sleep.

In this little bubble, I learned how to communicate, discovered what was appropriate to discuss and how to dress so people at work wouldn't take a look at my outfit and ask me if I planned to go to the opera that night.

Each day I worked on my language skills. I'd studied English in school, but it was a British version of English language.

At first, it was difficult to communicate. I'd heard just some of the words, and because it was not my native language, I had to assume what the conversation was about. But as I grew more comfortable, I started to relax. All of the carpool members were Oregonians, and some of them didn't travel much outside the state. They were curious about what I ate and where I shopped for groceries. Through these conversations we learned about each other.

In time, I learned the American version of small talk.

My buddies traveled with coffee mugs. Travel mugs were absolutely new for me. It was cool to see people walking on the streets with cups of coffee. I bought those travel mugs for my Russian friends and family as souvenirs.

This carpool was a vehicle that brought me to American culture. You can read American literature, watch movies and TV shows, but only when you can acquaint yourself with ordinary people on a regular basis does it become real.

By communicating about everyday life, you learn about the culture. I found more similarities than differences. People have the same family values and work ethic even the communication styles are different.

This carpool was a gift. I learned just by observing my fellow carpool members. Through listening, observing and trying to adapt to a new culture, I learned about myself. I learned my strengths and weaknesses.

And then the carpool ended.

My husband and I moved and I no longer needed a ride to the city. I moved on and started a new chapter in my life and journey. 

