

## Valuing diversity, inside and out

**RNAO's *Embracing Diversity Project*, driven by a respect for human dignity and a commitment to inclusivity, sets out to give teeth and truth to RNAO's assertion that we are "a community committed to diversity, inclusivity, democracy and voluntarism."**

Shirley\* had been nursing for nearly a decade when her career was cut short in 1994 on an Ottawa highway. A collision left her with neurological and balance problems, and chronic pain. Unable to do much of nursing's physical work, and reliant on a guide dog to help her with daily chores, Shirley is keen to keep her mind active. Last year, she began studying to complete her BScN. She says she sometimes needs help to overcome difficulties with her memory, but her greatest challenge is finding a job after graduation.

"Nursing is more than just physical work," she says, adding she still has much to offer. "If you've got patients who have been through devastating accidents or traumas in life (and) you can (relate) to them...they're more receptive to you."

Unfortunately, not everyone sees it that way. Many organizations tell Shirley it would be difficult to accommodate someone with a disability. When she arrived at a local community agency with her guide dog, the receptionist asked what services Shirley needed. After explaining she wanted work, Shirley says the receptionist was clearly uncomfortable.

Ensuring RNs like Shirley have the opportunity to participate fully in nursing and RNAO is one of the primary goals of RNAO's diversity and inclusivity project. RNAO president Joan Lesmond says the project, launched last fall, will give teeth and truth to an important assertion in RNAO's mission statement: "Respecting human dignity, we are a community committed to diversity, inclusivity, democracy and voluntarism."

Lesmond says the purpose of the *Embracing Diversity Project* is to broaden the sometimes narrow definition of diversity, which includes all 16 grounds upon which the Ontario Human Rights Code prohibits discrimination.

"It's important for every nurse to feel included in RNAO," Lesmond says, adding that RNAO is looking at how to be inclusive in everything it does – from internal operations, to policy formulation, to work with external stakeholders, to influencing the work and life of individual nurses.

"RNAO has an opening here to show leader-

ship in a meaningful manner, by together defining what diversity and inclusivity mean in practical and symbolic terms," Lesmond says. "To do that, we need members to own this issue, and help inform it."

RN Melanie Oda, the diversity consultant who is leading this project, agrees. Over the summer, Oda interviewed nearly 20 members representing RNAO's board, assembly, interest groups, and community stakeholders about their perceptions of diversity and inclusivity in the context of RNAO's mission statement, asking them to identify barriers to making RNAO a truly inclusive organization. In September, Oda also conducted a workshop for assembly members to encourage them to think broadly about diversity and inclusivity. "Diversity exists, it's visible and invisible" Oda says. "The real work is around (examining) how people accept and demonstrate that they value diversity."

Oda believes it's important for everyone to recognize the factors in their own lives – such as race, gender, socio-economic status or education level – that may give them privileges over other individuals.

RNAO member Vila Smith knows how it feels to be excluded.

She has lived in small towns across Ontario since leaving Malaysia in 1977.

Smith, who is of East Indian descent, says it can be difficult to be a visible minority in a smaller community. She felt isolated, for example, when she moved to Sault Ste. Marie more than 20 years ago. Now a professor at Sault College, Smith offers her support and experience to international students who face the same challenges. Next spring, she will be featured in an *OMNITV* documentary about visible minorities in rural Canada.

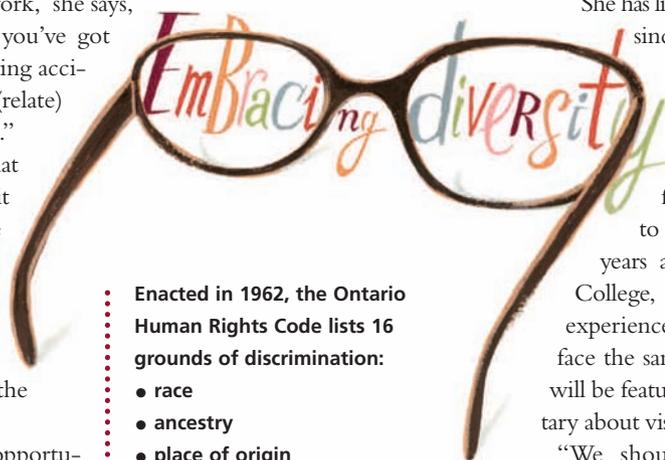
"We shouldn't hide our culture...we should also respect other people's culture. I think that's when you receive harmony," Smith says.

Smith and Shirley represent only two examples of the need for nurses to embrace diversity. Oda says stories like these help inform discussions and bring life to the project. In the coming months, Oda will prepare a resource kit that RNAO board and assembly members can discuss with their respective regional and chapter members, and with their co-workers. She will also co-chair a committee to oversee the project, making recommendations to RNAO's board of directors in early 2006.

"We need to make our commitment to diversity and inclusivity concrete," she says. "We need to walk the talk."

To share views and offer insights and experiences, contact Oda at [diversity@rnao.org](mailto:diversity@rnao.org). **RN**

JILL SHAW IS ACTING COMMUNICATIONS OFFICER/WRITER AT RNAO.



Enacted in 1962, the Ontario Human Rights Code lists 16 grounds of discrimination:

- race
- ancestry
- place of origin
- colour
- ethnic origin
- citizenship
- religion
- sex
- sexual orientation
- handicap
- age
- marital status
- family status
- same-sex partnership status
- receipt of public assistance (in accommodation only)
- record of offences (in employment only)

Source: Ontario Human Rights Commission website, <http://www.ohrc.on.ca/english/faqqs.shtml>

\*Shirley's last name has been withheld to protect her privacy.