

Faces of the YMCA

“My family feels safe at the YMCA....”

Akhtar Abdulkader

Akhtar Abdulkader was a fisherman who was born and raised in Somalia. In 1976, after he completed his secondary school education, Akhtar became a fisherman like his father, a job at which he worked for 27 years. In 2004, because of racial persecution, he decided to leave the war-torn country with his wife and four children, arriving after a five-day boat voyage at a Somalia Refugee Camp in Tanzania. There he found conditions were just as bad.

Akhtar asked people at his mosque for help and was advised to seek a safe haven in Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Finland or Canada. Of those countries, Canada was the safest, he was told. Akhtar and his family were unsure of the language and had no family or friends to help them connect to their new home in Canada, but he was “welcomed with open arms at a Fort Erie shelter.” Twelve days later, they arrived in St. Catharines, where there was a mosque.

“During my first two years in Canada, my family and I went to school to learn English and computers,” he says. “To practice my English and computer skills, I started to do volunteer work and that was when I was referred to the YMCA Newcomer Employment Assistance Program, which I completed in four weeks.”

Through this and volunteer work placements Akhtar had two work references and his first job. Two weeks before his seasonal contract expired, he was hired as an office administrator with the Y’s Employment Services in Niagara Falls, and he has been there ever since.

“The YMCA has given my family a place that is safe,” says Akhtar. “It allows me to utilize my skills and provide for my family. One daughter has special needs and participates weekly in YMCA programs. You can’t know what it means to know your children are safe – safe at the YMCA.”

“The YMCA allowed my family to go somewhere when it was cold, just to be together. My wife and I don’t worry so much here in Canada.

“Without the YMCA’s programs and staff I might still be going from one seasonal job to another. However, the picture of my life and my family’s life is very different now – I feel a part of the YMCA family and look forward to every Monday morning when I go to work.”