

Building bridges with film

A KIWANIS FOUNDATION HELPS SPOTLIGHT ITS CITY'S DIVERSITY.

BY CINDY DASHNAW

Koi Thompson took a 12-hour flight from modern Tokyo, her home for 17 years, to a small town called Stratford in Ontario, Canada. It's where she and her new husband, Craig, would start their life together. But she spent the first six hours trapped at the airport because officials "questioned her motivation for being here," Craig says. A lawyer finally secured her release.

The event started a chain of experiences that would keep Thompson feeling like an outsider for years. Today, she is determined to make sure others have a better experience — and Kiwanis Club of Stratford Charitable Foundation is helping to make it happen.

One of the first things Thompson noticed about Stratford was the lack of diversity among its residents.

"I was shocked. Everyone was white," she says.

Thompson spoke a little English, but she struggled being understood by others. This made even casual encounters intimidating.

"Strangers say hi to each other here. That doesn't happen in Japan — too many people," she says. "I didn't know what to do, so I wouldn't look up when I

went out. People thought I was cold, but I'm not."

Others were rudely impatient with the language barrier. "Can't you read?" one cashier retorted when Thompson questioned an item's cost.

"In the first six months, I became very quiet. It felt like depression, like I would never be comfortable here."



At Craig's urging, Thompson started a Chinese and a Japanese club, which grew quickly. More than a hundred people attended their most recent Chinese New Year's party — people they never see otherwise.

"They hide in their houses. People don't know [Asians] exist here. When I tell white people we have Chinese and Japanese in Stratford, they say, 'Where? I've never seen any.'"

Thompson and Craig plan to

change that perception and help other newcomers through film and Kiwanis.

Through Ballinran Entertainment, their award-winning production company, the couple will produce a series of mini-documentaries profiling Stratford newcomers from international destinations.

The project is made possible in part by the Kiwanis Club of Stratford Charitable Foundation. Craig's father is a 60-year Kiwanian, and the foundation's president, Jack Ross, has known them both for years.

"Kiwanis is all about making the community better, and this project is all about making Stratford a better place to live," Ross says. "We hope people will learn from it."

The two- to three-minute films are being released on social media and YouTube, one every two weeks until December 25. Thompson's dream is for the mini-documentaries to inspire people in and outside of Stratford to bridge cultural barriers.

"New people bring new thinking. Instead of confrontation or competition, we can remember we're all people. Think of different flowers: pink, red, yellow, purple. When they're all blooming, we have a beautiful garden." ☐