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PROFILE OF CHI ILIYA-NDULE

Chi Iliya-Ndule, is a corporate commercial lawyer in the Calgary office of Blake, Cassels and Graydon LLP. Chi previously practiced law in an international law firm based in Calgary and, prior to immigrating to Canada, in one of Nigeria's oldest law firms. Chi holds a Master of Laws (LL.M) from the University of Calgary, Canada and a Bachelor of Laws (LL.B) from Olabisi Onabanjo University, Nigeria.

Getting Started in Canada

Chi's journey as a new immigrant to Canada started in 2013 when she moved to Calgary from Nigeria with her husband. Having practiced law in Nigeria for over two years, it was a difficult decision to start her career from the beginning again in a new country. "For the first few years, I wasn't sure that I made the right decision. There were strong feelings of loneliness, isolation, and not seeing many people who look like me in the community. I wondered if I had made the right choice to come to Canada and how I would cope in the long run." says Chi.

To transition her career, Chi started in the Natural Resources, Energy and Environmental Law post-graduate program at the University of Calgary. "This was something that I was passionate about, and I thought it would provide a good base for my future career. At the same time, I was also looking into what it would take to get my training and experience recognized here to be a practicing lawyer. If you are a foreign-trained lawyer, there are a lot of

hoops you have to jump through to get back into your profession. The first step was to contact the National Committee of Accreditation." Chi realized that there would be additional exams she would have to write and get an expert panel to assess her qualifications and credentials to issue a certificate of qualification recognizing her training. "The biggest hurdle for foreign-trained lawyers is finding Articling positions." Articling requires law graduates to work as apprentices under the supervision of a licensed lawyer.

Articling typically lasts for one year and involves a variety of tasks, including legal research, drafting legal documents, attending court proceedings, and working with clients. The goal of articling is to provide law graduates with the opportunity to gain practical experience and develop their legal skills while being supervised by a licensed lawyer. "This part of the certification process is hard for many seasoned lawyers from outside of Canada as it requires an international trained lawyer to start over." says Chi. "To secure an Articling position often requires a lot of effort to build a network of support and mentors, and you have to learn to reach out for help and ask for assistance. But it is absolutely critical for advancing your career. It's not that you have to beg for a job. No! But you do have to let people know that you are open to opportunities and ask for help building a network of people who can assist you in your career aspirations. If you do not develop this skill, you will have a much



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tougher time returning to your previous career. I was very fortunate to make connections with some amazing people who were able to guide me in my career journey here in Canada. I want to give recognition to Damilola Olawuyi, former sessional lecturer at University of Calgary's Faculty of Law, Bruce Randal, the former ED at the Calgary Region Immigrant Employment Council (CRIEC), and Josephine Yam, the former ED of the Environmental Law Centre."

Networking is the Key

"If I can give one major piece of advice for foreign-trained professionals wanting to get back into their careers or to have success in any new field, I would say networking!" says Chi. "You never know who is out there who can give you your break or connect you with the right person that will take a chance on you." For Chi, her big break came at an evening reception where she struck up a casual conversation with Joanne Gordon, who was the Environmental, Occupational Health, Safety & Regulatory Lawyer with Repsol at the time. Ms. Gordon connected Chi with a number of individuals, one of which resulted in an interview and an articling position with international law firm, where she completed her articles. "It's not that people need to find you a job. I think this is what makes people nervous about networking. To me, it's about putting yourself out there to make connections with others who can open doors for you and vice versa. Ultimately, it's

up to each one of us to make the most of those open doors and demonstrate our skills to walk through them confidently." Before that one chance encounter, Chi had dropped off 20+ resumes in-person at various law firms in Calgary. "I wanted to demonstrate my drive and meet people in person at these law firms, but I wasn't having much success. I have to say that my confidence was floundering at the time. My meeting with Joanne, changed my law career prospects. That is the power of networking!". She also recommends looking for mentors. "I am closer to my goal today because of the awesome mentors I have" says Chi. "We may need to reach out to people outside of our inner circle and ask for advice on how to navigate the system. Not every encounter will result in a story like mine with Joanne, but I believe we can try to learn something from every encounter."

Giving Back to the Community

Now that Chi has established her career in Calgary, she is very active in volunteering, mentoring others and giving back to the community to elevate the opportunities for other young Black professionals. "When I first came to Calgary, I experienced a lot of culture shock, and I struggled with micro-aggressions that chipped away at my confidence. I didn't see a lot of other Black professionals like me, and I certainly didn't know where to turn to for advice." To help improve the situation for Black individuals and new immigrants, Chi is now taking



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a leadership role in providing opportunities for Black professionals to connect and establish a support network of mentors, coaches, and allies that can advocate for them. She is a Co-Founder and President of the Calgary Black Chambers (CBC), a not-for-profit organization working to increase Black leadership capacity and uplift BIPOC culture throughout Calgary through community volunteering, advocacy and providing scholarships and mentorships for future generations.

Chi is actively involved in the community. She currently serves on the boards of Alberta University of the Arts, where she also acts as Chair of the Human Resources and Governance Committee, and Antyx Community Arts, a not-for-profit organization dedicated to engaging youth through the arts, where she also sits on the Human Resources and Governance Committee. She also sits on the executive committee of the Environmental, Energy and Resources Law Section of the Canadian Bar Association, provides pro bono legal services through the Civil Claims Duty Counsel Project and Queens Bench Court Assistance Project with Pro Bono Law Alberta, and mentors internationally trained lawyers through Calgary Regional Immigrant Employment Council.

The Significance of Black History Month

“To me, Black History Month is about amplifying the work that the Black community is doing in the city and empowering young Black individuals on their life journey. I aim to ensure that Black kids growing up in our society are more comfortable in their skin, see a path that welcomes their unique skills, and can be inspired to accomplish their dreams. For young people, don’t be afraid to reach out to people in your community who can offer a positive influence and help you achieve your goals.” Chi strongly emphasizes allyship as a way forward. She believes that we need allies to actively support the work of equity, diversity and inclusion to create a more equitable society.

Chi’s advocacy in the community is a model for others to follow in breaking down barriers and obstacles toward acceptance of all people, all skin colours, and a society without racial biases. Thank you, Chi, for all that you do in our community.

*Interview conducted by: Robert Toth,
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The Immigrant Education Society (TIES)*