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Bridging the language gap

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It looks like a game of verbal Ping-Pong, but Ekrem Belli's health depends on the outcome.

In a consulting room at Bridgepoint Hospital, the Turkish-speaking patient sits at a small table with speech pathologist Barbara Anne Molo. She asks questions in English, using photos as prompts to test his memory and vocabulary.

Between them sits Murat Kandemir, a trained translator. He rapidly translates the therapist's words into Turkish for Mr. Belli, who replies in his native tongue. Seconds later, in English, Mr. Kandemir feeds back the responses to Ms. Molo.

"I'm the bridge," Mr. Kandemir says proudly. "If I don't exist, there is no connection."

"When newcomers come [here], the first thing they need is a job," says Sundar Singh of Riverdale Interpreters. "But when they go to find employment, people tell them 'you require Canadian experience' and they become discouraged."

In multicultural Toronto, language is a portable skill.

"Once you make them realize that a second language is very important in a city like Toronto, they say, 'Oh my goodness, I do have the skills,' " Ms. Singh says.

Last month, the service, now managed by the Elspeth Heyworth Centre for Women, won a \$30,000 award from the Toronto Community Foundation to expand operations.

At its inception, Riverdale Interpreters had a roster of 12 accredited interpreters covering five languages. Five years later, the business has a network of 335

trained freelancers who work in 56 languages, available 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Ms. Singh credits Bridgepoint Hospital for an early boost.

About 40 per cent of patients at the east-end hospital speak a language other than English, with its own staff unable to meet the demand by themselves.

"Riverdale Interpreters is in the community and provides a great service," says Stephanie Brundl, manager of central therapy at Bridgepoint, which receives about 1,500 requests a year for interpreters.

For Mr. Kandemir, who came to Toronto from Turkey in 2000, his work at Riverdale Interpreters has helped him put down roots in his adopted city.

To his astonishment, he has a network of friends that includes immigrants from Iran and Tibet -- relationships he says would have been impossible had he stayed in Turkey.

Now 24, he initially volunteered his language skills in the Turkish community.

"I saw friends struggling in English, trying to tell their problems to the hospital or a lawyer," he recalls. Two years ago, he signed up with Riverdale Interpreters and took the necessary training to be fully accredited.

"I want to use my skills and abilities to help people so they can be heard," he says.

That sentiment is shared by Suppiah Sokkalingam, who works for Riverdale Interpreters and other agencies.

In 1991, he came to Toronto with his wife and three children to escape political strife in his native Sri Lanka.

"Their future was very important and I did not want anything to happen to them," says Mr. Sokkalingam, who is fluent in English, Tamil and a local dialect. He had been trained as a teacher, and initially found work as a private school tutor.

In 2002, he joined Riverdale Interpreters as a certified translator, but he also freelances with several other language agencies. Through his work with doctors, nurses and lawyers, says Mr. Sokkalingam, "I have learned so many things about how the city and the country works."

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