

Starring ... the city that cares

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Shamso Elmi came to Canada from Somalia in 1987 and learned the hard way about the challenges of settling into a new life in a new country.

She moved first to Vancouver then made her home in Hamilton in 1995.

In addition to raising her own seven children, plus two stepchildren and one foster child, she sometimes held three jobs -- house cleaner, translator and package handler at UPS.

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"I know that feeling of feeling helpless," she says.

It was difficult to find a decent place to live and sometimes more difficult dealing with unethical landlords.

Although settled into her new country, she says there are still obstacles, like the racist attitudes she encounters regularly.

"I still feel it is tough," she says.

While Elmi's story is her own, it's also the story of many immigrant women.

That's why when Toronto filmmaker Laura Sky came to Hamilton looking for people to feature in her film, she knew Elmi was the perfect candidate.

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Sky, an award-winning documentary filmmaker, produces films on social justice through her company, Sky Works Charitable Foundation.

Now she's turning her lens on Hamilton to be part of a three-part documentary series on poverty and homelessness in Canada. Called Home Safe, her first two films were shot in Calgary and Toronto.

Not only was Elmi someone who had faced adversity, she was also using what she'd learned to help others.

Elmi now helps Somali immigrants through Settlement and Integration Services Organization (SISO).

The fact that Sky chose to include Hamilton in her series on poverty isn't all bad news.

Yes, she recognized the city has a high rate of poverty (18 per cent of Hamiltonians or 90,000 people as of the 2005 Census).

But she also chose it because she says it has an energy and a heart.

That's shown, she says, in the way groups work together, like Hamilton's Roundtable On Poverty Reduction, one of several groups she worked closely with for the film.

"It's a city that cares with a capital C," said Sky.

"It has its head and heart connected. You don't have to convince anyone there that poverty is an issue."

The Hamilton film will focus on new immigrants and aboriginal people who live in poverty.

Sky is halfway through filming in Hamilton and hopes to premiere the film here in May or June.

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