

Petites-Mains celebrates its 10th anniversary

Côte des Neiges organization helps women gain entry into the garment industry

By JESSICA MURPHY
The Chronicle

Petites-Mains is a small organization that can throw a big party.

The non-profit job insertion and social integration workshop celebrated its tenth anniversary, and everyone from Quebec's Lieutenant Governor Lise Thibault, Immigration Minister Lise Thériault, and Montreal Mayor Gérald Tremblay showed up.

Petites-Mains was born in CDN in 1994, following the closing of a local food bank. It was thought up by Sister Denise Arsénault and Nahid Aboumansour, the organization's current general director (Arsénault passed away in Feb. 2004). The goal was to teach women — generally immigrants, but not exclusively — to learn industrial sewing and integrate them into the local job market.

What began with six participants now trains over 60 participants a year. Petites-Mains pays the women minimum wage to learn industrial sewing. The graduates have an 87.5 per cent placement rate, as many local employers in the garment industry



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Fatima Bourrada offers Quebec Lieutenant Governor Lise Thibault some traditional Moroccan and Algerian food during Petites Mains' anniversary celebration.

quickly hire them because of the high quality of the training they receive.

The provincial government, the City of Montreal, and CDEC CDN-NDG all sup-

port the organization, and it has received numerous awards over the past decade.

Social integration has also played an increasing role. Regular cultural and social activities and French-language courses are offered to the women. Including French in the

training allows the women to participate more easily in Montreal life and to communicate with their children who learn French in school.

Pratheepa Maheswaian, a young-looking 30-year-old Sri Lankan immigrant, currently has two-months left in her training. She's learning French along with industrial sewing. "I came (to Canada) 10 years ago, and I didn't have any work, so I needed experience," she said. "It's good, it's good company, we work together as a group. It's like a family."

The anniversary party — and graduation ceremony for a number of the women — celebrated the multicultural aspect of Petites-Mains, with food and entertainment from around the world.

"Thank you for still believing in these women and these young women who want to integrate into Montreal (life)," said Francine Sénécal, CDN city councillor.

Near the end of the evening, Lieutenant Governor Thibault gave a \$5,000 birthday gift to Petites-Mains, which she called the most beautiful integration centre she'd seen in Quebec. Their hands give the women the tools they need to fully integrate into their new life, she noted. Confined to a wheelchair, she said: "Hands are some of the most beautiful things in life. I lost my legs, but at least I didn't lose my hands."