

Microbiologist Makes a Sweet Life

By Gwen Pawlikowski

Arash Mazaheri's story of immigrating to Vancouver seems like a movie montage: an 11-day road trip across the country spliced together with work in a chocolate factory.

Of course, in between the events of this narrative, there was a lot more, including a MAPLE 2.0 internship. And the story wasn't always sweet. But the ending is.



Mazaheri arrived in freezing Toronto from Iran in November of 2009. The microbiologist had left his position in a medical lab to make a new life in Canada.

Unfortunately, when he landed here, his friends living in the city had bad news for him.

They told him that finding a similar job could be a challenge because of the need for recognition and certification by the Canadian Society for Medical Laboratory Science.

On the contrary, working in a non-medical lab involved only voluntary certification.

Following his friend's advice, Mazaheri decided to make a shift; he registered in a two-year college program that trained him for laboratory work in the food industry. The program even included a practicum at a local company; unfortunately, it was in a cosmetics company

and not in food processing. Still, the newcomer blazed through his courses in half the time needed, feeling confident and ready for his next step by November of 2011.

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Looking for an adventure, Mazaheri jumped in a vehicle with a friend and drove across the country, seeing parts of Canada that many people never have a chance to view. Upon arriving in the Lower Mainland, he was stunned by how the Greater Vancouver area differed from Toronto. To say he was pleased would be an understatement.

"To me it was totally different. Different countries—they don't even look the same. I don't know how both are in the same country," he reflected.

He loved the mountains, the ocean, the weather and the ethos of outdoor experience. Plus, he had relatives here. He was determined to stay.

"I'm an outdoors person," says the man who's done the Grouse Grind countless times. "I really like to go on nature walks and I'm hiking all the weekend. [Living in the Lower Mainland] is my dream come true."

However, he had some difficulty getting the local labour market to cooperate. Despite sending out resumes for food lab jobs, he wasn't getting hired. He was able to get a customer service position at a big-box retailer; that sustained him

somewhat. Sadly, his ample lab skills were not being used: a frustrating fact.

“It was really hard,” he said, of the months he searched for a position in his field.

“I was really frustrated because I had knowledge. I had everything but I couldn’t get my feet in the door.”

Fortunately, a city bus connected Mazaheri to his next step. Not because he took a ride on the bus, but because of what he saw on the outside: an ad for Immigrant Services Society of BC. It seemed to offer the help he needed.

Seeking insight into his dilemma, the lab professional visited the non-profit agency and got some assistance with his job search documents. He also learned about the MAPLE 2.0 program of internships. Staff representatives believed he was a good fit for the program.

By January of 2012, Mazaheri was selected for a MAPLE 2.0 internship at a Burnaby laboratory testing company. He would be working part-time in water testing.

On the first day, a company representative took him on a tour of the facility and directed him to safety procedures and equipment, as well as emergency exits. He was also introduced to the many people who would be his co-workers and managers. With these strong values of safety and teamwork thoroughly communicated, the company got its newest intern started preparing samples and logging data into the company’s computer system. Throughout the internship, the employer reinforced the idea of GLPs—good laboratory practices.

As Mazaheri settled in, he made friends. He even got to know a co-worker who would become his new best pal.

But getting a paid job was more important than socializing at that point. As soon as he was able to, Mazaheri added the local experience to his resume. The result of the addition was stunning.

Within a month, he was interviewing for a position with a chicken processing company in Abbotsford. Even before the internship was completed, the company had offered him a job

that would allow him to complete his work in Burnaby but also begin his new position. The results of having local, relevant experience were dramatic.

“In Canada, everywhere, they need Canadian experience in your professional job...[The internship] was really helping me because that put professional experience on my resume,” Mazaheri explained.

Having a job in his field allowed this hiking enthusiast to fully enjoy the weekends of outdoor experience in the Lower Mainland without worry. He also gained a stronger sense of belonging that he would not have felt had he been stuck in a job that didn’t use his skills.

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Despite getting hired, Mazaheri actually found that his future held another sweet surprise. After about a year of work, he was offered a job in a quality assurance at a different Abbotsford factory: one that makes a substance frequently used as bribes to children (and adults): delicious, much-adored chocolate. As of September, 2013, Mazaheri has been working in a chocolate factory. Sweet!

Now, you’ll be surprised to learn that this new position didn’t actually please everyone. The QA Specialist’s sister is a dentist. She was probably a little worried about the sugar.

Nevertheless, despite concern about her brother’s teeth, she can relax, knowing that his emotional state is in good shape: he is happy.

So like the story of Willy Wonka’s famous chocolate factory, this one ends well. Mazaheri loves his life in and out of work, loves his five-minute commute to his job and has moved from the sidelines to a main character role in a lab setting. His story has been resolved.

But like all good stories, resolution may not have been possible without a little help from other characters. Earlier, at the beginning of this story’s rising action, the team at MAPLE 2.0 played a pivotal, supporting role.