

A 'Tree'-mendous beginning



PAUL MAYNE // WESTERN NEWS

PhD student Janet Loebach of Western's Human Environments Analysis Lab (Geography) joined students and teachers at Blessed Sacrament Catholic School in celebrating the planting of a large Sycamore tree Tuesday afternoon. With a \$25,000 grant from the London Community Foundation, Loebach is leading a 'greening' project to make Blessed Sacrament's schoolyard a healthier place to play. Located in a high-traffic area on busy Oxford Street, one of the school's play areas is considered 'out-of-bounds' for the children over safety concerns. Testing the area showed high levels of pollutants from idling vehicles as well as the exhaust of nearby vehicles. Work on the school yard will be ongoing. tinyurl.com/n9ge8jv.

Research

Study: Media reflection of immigrants not reality

BY ADELA TALBOT

A NEW WESTERN-LED study shows Canadian media outlets exploit already existing negative portrayals of immigrants in order to create a crisis mentality. It's an approach, researchers argue, that harms the nation as a whole.

Led by Western psychology professor Victoria Esses, along with PhD student Stelian Medianu and Andrea Lawson of Mount Sinai Hospital in Toronto, the study reveals the effects of the media's negative depictions of immigrants and refugees.

"I've been interested in the public's attitude toward immigrants and immigration for a long time, for 20 years," Esses said. "The media's depiction of immigrants is rather extreme than moderate, and they portray this kind of hysteria and crisis mentality about immigration."

The study, *Uncertainty, Threat, and the Role of the Media in Promoting*



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found numerous explicit and implicit suggestions – including immigrants spread infectious diseases, refugee claims are often fake and terrorists enter countries disguised as refugees – are all responsible for the dehumanization of immigrants and refugees, a group already on the margins of society.

Esses cited the arrival of the Tamil refugee boats on the shores of British Columbia in 2010 as an example.

"You could look at those people as people who might be pitied, people who we might try and help. But positive messages don't sell; research has

been done to show negative messages sell better," she explained.

"The media took advantage and portrayed the (refugees) in a negative light, leading to changes to refugee policies and claims of Canada's safety being threatened," Esses continued, noting given a relatively low number of refugees coming to Canada each year, the threat is not that great.

Meanwhile, in the coverage of the Tamil refugees' arrival, pictures of Canadian immigration officials in full HAZMAT suits circled, alongside claims the refugees were illegal and a threat to Canada.

"On the other hand, they (the refugees) put themselves at risk and lived in horrible conditions to get here. We could have focused on that. But we didn't. The media focused on the hazards – that they might be bringing in terrorists or bringing in disease," Esses said.

"In events we're uncertain about, it's easy to blame other people. The

media takes advantage of that to have this crisis attitude," she continued, adding the SARS epidemic is just one more example that proves her study's hypothesis.

The costs of the negative associations the media assigns immigrants and refugees are grave, Esses said.

"The consequence of that is people aren't (seen as) quite human, so they don't deserve human treatment. This allows us, in a moral way, to believe we are not doing anything wrong, so what we do they deserve because they are outside our scope of justice."

But the cost of the media's dehumanization of immigrants and refugees extends far beyond the less-than-appropriate attention they receive once they arrive in Canada; it harms the nation as a whole, Esses continued.

"We need immigrants. We're in a race to bring in skilled workers. If attitudes toward immigration and refugees are negative, they won't want

to come, they won't want to stay and we won't be able to retain them in the communities where they are needed," she said. "We need immigrants, we want immigrants and we're bringing in immigrants to build our economy and our population base."

"This isn't just about being fair to immigrants; this benefits all of us."

Esses said the next steps include looking at what can be done to change the media's attitude, perception and approach when dealing with stories relating to immigration and refugee issues.

"Can more balanced media stories that humanize immigrants be used to improve perceptions of them? What are refugees experiencing? What are their lives like?" she asked. "If we can induce some empathy, which isn't hard to do, we would be more likely to have support for refugees and policies." **WN**