

'Everyone here seems to understand each other'

By David Hayes December 3, 2010 Toronto Star

I first heard of Amchok Gompo Dhondup when a friend showed me an extraordinary online documentary, *Highrise: Out My Window*, made for the National Film Board. In it, Dhondup plays a damnyen (six-stringed lute) and, in a melodic blend of chanting and singing, performs "Snowland," a traditional Tibetan song, while his children and some friends dance around his living room. You can see the documentary at <http://interactive.nfb.ca/#/outmywindow/>.

Last week, I visited Dhondup in his \$750-a-month, one-bedroom apartment on the 15th floor of one of the pair of semi-circular highrises that make up West Lodge Towers, the tallest buildings in Parkdale. It's the same sparsely furnished living room seen in the documentary — several Indian rugs on the parquet hardwood and draped over a day bed, a cabinet containing items like a photo of the Dalai Lama, a small Tibetan flag and seven prayer bowls filled with water. While we talk, his wife, Thanglo, sits on the floor with their two sons, 11-year-old Paladin Tsering and 9-year-old Jamyang Samdup, watching TV.

A slightly built 32-year-old, Dhondup is wearing a white cap, a burgundy t-shirt under a blue hoodie and jeans. Around his neck hangs a Buddhist prayer charm. His English is still relatively limited and heavily-accented.

"I love this building," he says. "There are people here from all over the world, living in one community. And somehow everyone seems to understand each other.

West Lodge Towers was opened in the 1960s as upscale rental housing (Canadian country star Tommy Hunter once lived in a penthouse) and there's still evidence of that past — '60s-vintage aluminum light fixtures and a goldfish pond in the lobby, a huge concrete sculpture like an opening flower outside the entrance. But over the decades fortunes changed and the complex went through periods of crime, fires, repeated power failures and dodgy landlords. Today, it's more stable and home to a blend of almost every culture that makes up Toronto's multi-cultural population.

Dhondup is part of the Tibetan diaspora that began when China invaded in 1959 and chased the country's spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama, into exile in India. (Today most of Tibet is divided into "autonomous areas" that are part of the People's Republic of China. To display pictures of the Dalai Lama, even inside homes, is illegal.) An estimated 5,000 to 6,000 displaced Tibetans live in Toronto, a great many clustered in rental housing in Parkdale, which is known as "Little Tibet." Restaurants, like Tibet Kitchen and Le Tibet, and shops, like Tibet Emporium and Entertainment and Tibet Touch, reflect the community. To pick up mung bean thread noodles, tsampa flour and yak butter tea means a trip to Shangri-La Produce.

Dhondup grew up one of nine children of nomadic herders in the northeastern Tibetan province of Amdo. As a teenager, he became a musician and singer but

he performed traditional songs that praised Tibetan culture and the Dalai Lama, which made him a dissident in the eyes of the Chinese authorities. In 2000, he fled to Dharamsala in India, a centre for Tibetan refugees. There he met the Dalai Lama, who told him to teach others Tibetan music.

In 2005, when Dhondup appeared as a performer at The Banff Centre's Cultures at Risk Summit, he applied for refugee status. Later he became a permanent resident and was able to bring Thanglo and his children to Toronto. Today he takes ESL lessons and works as an artist. His latest project, funded by his many friends and supporters, is a 94-minute feature film about a Tibetan family that was shot over two months in India and will be screened for the first time next Saturday. (Details on the news page at www.omsinger.com.)

While he's happy living as a renter for now, he says, "Canada gave me a country, a place to be free, but renting an apartment means I still don't feel permanent. One day my dream is to own a home."

One concern on Dhondup's mind, in common with everyone who comes to Canada from other parts of the world, is his children. Will they be assimilated so completely that they lose interest in their ancestry? Already his sons have adapted, speaking English fluently and embracing their new world.

"Look at this," says Dhondup, turning his laptop to show me a music video he made of his eldest son, Paladin, singing "Turn It Up" by Canadian pop band, Stereos (www.vimeo.com/17224565). Paladin covers his ears and runs out of the living room but returns a few minutes later. When I ask him what he wants to be when he grows up, he says, "to play in the NBA."

Dhondup smiles indulgently and reminds him that he's going to learn to play hockey, too.