

BROCK'S BANTER: At the gates

By Brock Weir

Despite grey and gloomy skies on Friday, I left Trinity Anglican Church with a bit of sunshine.

I am not a religious guy by nature, and the light I felt did not spring from a service in particular, rather it was from a meeting I just had with three women who have been driving forces behind Aurora and Newmarket's fledgling Interfaith Refugee Resettlers group: Mae Khamissa, Karen Kines, and Katherine Webster. It had been a few months since I first met with Ms. Khamissa to discuss the initial foundation of the group, which has brought together members of Trinity, Aurora United Church, and the Newmarket Islamic Centre, and I was asked to sit in on a meeting that day to discuss how far they have come in their work.

From a foundation formed on the all-too-often rickety beams of good intentions, they have developed a well-oiled machine, complete with an abundance of volunteers that have divided themselves into committees designed to cover every single base that might be needed by a family fleeing the dangers of Syria for a better life in the Aurora and Newmarket areas.

What struck me is this is a true interfaith group. It is not a group that is limited to those who subscribe to one particular organized religion ? Christian, Muslim, or what have you ? but one that welcomes volunteers from all faiths, no faiths, and the great undecideds.

I was also struck by the fact that seeds planted by Trinity over 30 years ago are still germinating. In the late 1970s, a group of 12 volunteers from Trinity sponsored a family of Vietnamese Boat People. While some members of this family still live in the vicinity of York Region, many have dispersed across Ontario. Evidently, however, they still keep in touch and word has gotten back to them about Trinity's latest humanitarian effort.

?There have been two men from families who were supported by Trinity who were Boat People and they heard about this and although they aren't members of our congregations said, ?we have a moving van. When the time comes and you need us, call us and we will help these people and do whatever you need us to do,? said Ms. Webster. ?That is what we are looking for. The interfaith community comes together to bring the community together in a goal. The faith is not the point; it is the community involvement that is the point.?

As I prepared to head back to the office, Ms. Kines left me with this thought: ?We are not any different than those folks in the sense that we all want security, we all want to raise our children in a safe place. We just want to have everything the world can offer us. We can now help those folks to have those things they desire and we desire.?

This view of all rowing in the same direction was bolstered by Ms. Khamissa who summed it all up, saying it is all about humanity, about people who have been taken away from what they have known, and are looking for a better life.

Had the day ended right after this meeting, it would have ended on a high note. Unfortunately that was not the case.

Shortly after the meeting, I was Toronto-bound for the Royal Agricultural Winter Fair. This is normally a yearly excursion for me, but after missing last year's event for a variety of reasons I was particularly eager to take in everything the event had to offer. It did not disappoint. Following a special presentation by the Countess of Wessex to Wind Reach Farm, a horse facility that provides therapeutic riding for those living with disabilities, I toured around, made a late lunch of all the wonderful samples farmers and producers had on offer, and settled in to watch some very well-groomed cattle be paraded into the Championship ring.

As I stood on the sidelines watching the bovine beauties, however, I turned around to find no less than nine members of the Toronto Police Services standing behind me. After momentarily considering whether I had sampled something that wasn't actually a sample, I saw a cluster of cops forming on the other side of the ring and then, stepping away from the action, saw them walking the length and breadth of the event.

Wondering what was happening, I took my silenced phone out of my pocket and got my first word of the terrorist attacks in Paris that had happened just a short time before. Evidently, Toronto was not taking any chances with a potential soft target like the Royal Winter Fair and responded accordingly.

What happened in the City of Lights is, to be sure, a devastating event, not to mention additional attacks in other, less Western parts of the world such as Beirut that same day, and the lasting ramifications are, at this writing, still unclear.

Transfixed by the news for the rest of the afternoon and evening, I couldn't help but feel clouds forming on the sunshine with which I left Trinity.

Indeed, social media confirmed my fears when I saw a number of people posting racist and xenophobic rants and diatribes about not only Muslims in general but specifically those trying to flee Syria in the hopes of a better life.

Places like Canada, they said and shared, should close the gates to immigrants, egged on by their questionable followers.

Charity should begin at home, ranted others, as their own brand of bobby-soxers chimed in with pithy words of agreement without actually making any firm commitments they were going to put their best foot forward and look into adopting a child languishing in our foster care system, donating a disused winter coat to someone on the street bracing for the freezing weather sure to come, or that they would get off their collective duffs to even donate a can of Chef Boyardee to their local food bank.

Empty words, empty sentiments. Don't get me wrong: It would be great if those complaining and ranting from the comforts of their own laptop actually follow their own advice and do something for those in need here at home, and countless community groups would benefit. But the reality is, they're not.

Rants on social media these days only seem to lead to positive progress in places like, say, the Middle East.

These women of the Interfaith Refugee Resettlers, and the countless volunteers that are part of this group, are not letting what happened in Paris diminish their enthusiasm. In fact, it has probably galvanized the group to double down in the face of these reactionary challenges. And we, as Aurorans, will be all the better for it.

Those looking to start fresh from the terror that has ravaged the Middle East are people who are conscientiously rejecting the influx of fear and barbarism that has infected their homeland. They are the future and we should welcome them with open arms.