

Refugees should be welcomed with open arms: Aurora volunteers



By Brock Weir

On Friday morning, representatives of the Interfaith Refugee Resettlers (IRR) were pumped and ready to go.

The group, a collective of members belonging to Trinity Anglican Church, Aurora United Church, and the Newmarket Islamic Centre, were buoyed by a change at the top, feeling they "had the nod" to move forward with their plans to sponsor at least one refugee family from Syria to settle in the area.

For them, the policies of the new Trudeau government left them "excited" the gates are open, in stark contrast to what they felt was something of an "uphill battle" in making their plan come to fruition.

Just a couple of hours after meeting at Trinity to discuss their next steps, word of the terrorist attack in Paris broke.

Despite calls from some quarters for governments around the world to take a second look at their policies regarding the flow of refugees from Syria, this local group remains steadfast in their excitement and drive to make a marked difference in the lives of at least one family fleeing in search of a better life "and this is an excitement and drive they hope to spread throughout the community regardless of faith.

"The Canadian government has assured the public they will not back down on their commitment to bring 25,000 refugees to Canada and they will be chosen in a safe and responsible manner to deal with possible security risks," says Katherine Webster, a member of Trinity serving on the IRR. "We were relieved to hear this and gladdened by the knowledge our government has not responded to this tragedy with a knee-jerk reaction that could potentially affect the lives of so many in need of our support.

"We cannot be a nation that gives into anger and fear; we should do our best to oppose extremism. We are a generous people and we should open our doors to the flood of refugees, not close them."

Ms. Webster, a child of a Canadian diplomat who grew up in far flung corners of the globe says the IRR might come from a place of faith, but they have a "tremendously Canadian" perspective. She says she watched with dismay as Canada went down what she describes as a "xenophobic route", but that was not the Canadian way.

This is a view shared by Mae Khamissa, a member of the Islamic Centre, and one of the founding members of the IRR. For her, it is all about humanity "full stop.

"These are just innocent families that have been taken away from what they have known and what they have, and at the end of the

day we really don't care," she says. "As long as they come here and we can show them the kind of people we are and what we have to offer, we are really looking forward to welcoming them."

There is still a lot of work to be done before the IRR can put out the welcome mat for their first refugee family. Working in conjunction with AURA, a Canadian charitable organization assisting in the sponsorship and resettlement of refugees, they have formed their subcommittees, are well underway in raising the funds necessary to host a family -- \$30,000 is recommended -- and they are divvying up responsibilities for when the time comes.

Since their formation earlier this year, they're now seeing "real, tangible progress", getting their police checks and undergoing training for working with vulnerable individuals.

"There will be feelings of misgivings, of fear, of worry and all the things that psychologically come with being a displaced person," says Ms. Webster. "The training speaks to that, but also how to best deal with that and what resources to use. While we're all very keen to help and support these people to Canada and a free life, we're not necessarily counsellors. We can't counsel them through what they have seen and what they have been through in their journey. AURA will give us all the support to get the first year underway."

But, as the saying goes, it takes a community to raise a child. A refugee family from a war-torn country might be an entirely different prospect, but the spirit still applies, says Karen Kines of Aurora United Church.

"We really would like the community to come together, not just our own [faith] communities, but the larger Aurora-Newmarket community to be open to the idea that they might want to donate towards future families coming," she says.

Volunteers of all faiths -- and no faiths -- are welcomed, just "good citizens of the world", they say. Participation can include people who might have a few hours a week to help teach the family English, train them on how to use public transportation and access services, have one afternoon a week to take them shopping, or even simply invite them over for a dinner.

Landlords should also take note -- before the family arrives, the IRR needs to secure a place for them to stay. They simply need a reasonable house with at least two bedrooms that is clean, affordable, safe, and close to schools. The refugee family needs to be close to their support network, they say, and any landlord can be assured of payment because rent and maintenance will be coming directly from the IRR rather than the refugee family themselves.

"It is not an expectation of the family that has arrived here to cobble together rent," says Ms. Webster. "It is here, it is a safe bet, the home itself is supported by us. There is no risk."

Until they get word on just how many will be in their first family, however, they don't know exactly how much space they will need in a future home. When that becomes clearer in the weeks ahead, the group is prepared to hit the ground running.

"We know it is happening and it is going to happen quickly," says Ms. Khamissa. "We just have to be prepared for that, and I think we are. It is so crucial to know that when you have these three communities together there are more hands to be able to help. Other groups have come to us to say they have tried and then they realize they're not going to have the time to do this and that. Here, I think we have ample volunteers and that is what is going to make this a successful community."

"The key thing is the interfaith part. Being a joint interfaith community, we have all the resources pulled together and we have people who will be willing to say, 'You know what? I can do that.' We want to show them how Canadian we are. This is who we are. I can't stress that enough. That is what Canada is."

For more information on the Interfaith Refugee Resettlers and how to make a contribution, whether financial, time, or services, email irrctee@gmail.com. Donations will also be accepted through the mail -- payable to the faith group of their choice with "Refugee Fund" noted on the cheque -- at Interfaith Refugee Resettlers, c/o Trinity Church, 79 Victoria Street, Aurora, ON L4G 1R3.