

THEY HAVE ARRIVED!

How do you fall in love 15 times in one fell swoop? -

Easy, just sponsor 15 Syrian Refugees!

Thursday 13th April was happy yet tense day for all those who have been involved in the North Shore United Refugee Response team and those who have assisted and donated towards this worthy cause.

We happily awaited the arrival of our two families from the refugee camp in Erbil, Iraq, the transit had taken more than 47 hours with several stops in between, they'd have had little sleep and would have gone through the immigration process in Montreal, changing their status from Refugee to Newcomer Canadian Permanent Residents. We knew they'd be exhausted but excited. In reality their long journey began more than 2 years ago when they made the decision to leave their relatives and friends, their homes and all of their possessions to make a dangerous trek across mountains and rivers toward freedom, leaving tyranny, bombs, potential enslavement and danger behind.

For us here in Canada, the planning and anticipation was over, the real work about to begin. As representatives of the 7 United Churches gathered with our welcome signs, banners and Canadian flags, Lea Borlick burst into song: "O Canada" has never been more emotional, the words more meaningful. As passengers streamed by we were showered in comments: "Are you waiting for the refugees? They are lovely!" and "Such lovely people, thank you for doing this!" People came over to shake our hands and expressing thanks for representing Canada in supporting these Newcomers.

Finally, the two fathers led their families down the escalators in the domestic arrivals area to be greeted first by their local relatives in a tearful reunion. Adnan's two brothers, Jwan (landed a year ago after 4 years in a refugee camp in Egypt) and Kawa (whom we are sponsoring) had not seen each other in more than 10 years. it was indeed an historic moment for us all witnessing such joy. Jwan was really happy to re-unite with Ruth Williams who had tutored him last year.

Next, it was our turn. Handshakes and smiles all around, we welcomed them to their new country and snapped photos galore (which we may not publish on social media). After a hasty welcome message where I said that after a year of support, I'm sure we'll all be like extended family (turns out it took less than 12 days!). We thought we had the logistics of carpooling down pat, however there was much more baggage than we'd anticipated but it wasn't a problem we just seconded an extra driver and vehicle or two and we transported them to their new homes, short trips that were filled with laughter and joking. Both families are very happily settled in now and enjoying a measure of freedom that they have not had in many years.

As sponsors we had a long list of "to do's" to help the family with. We've been extremely busy - so far this is what we've achieved:

- Copies of all pertinent documents have been done as they are required for many registrations etc.
- Social Insurance Numbers assigned
- Interim Federal Health Plan registered for
- Canadian Child Tax Benefit registered for
- GST refunds for low income families registered for
- Bank accounts opened and money handling explained
- Compass cards purchased and loaded - still do to the orientation piece but some have ventured onto transit already
- Mobile phones have new SIM cards and plans in place, we donated several 2nd hand phones and MOSAIC donated pay as you go cards to \$200 for each family, they are all set up with WhatsApp for free messaging
- Computers are in both homes, 1 each donated by MOSAIC, another by Alan Brown and a laptop from Heather Williams
- Health check up appointments arranged (some completed already)

- New Glasses for Badran (his were broken, the optician did an eye test and provided the glasses for FREE!)
- New glasses for Havi (hers were broken, she will get the eye test for FREE!)
- Eye test for Lava (she was having headaches and needed readers, again for FREE!)
- Orthodontic appointment for Lava (she had braces when they fled and many metal studs were in place still for FREE!)
- Dental appointment for Lava (she has a bad tooth so is now on antibiotics to settle the infection and the tooth will be extracted, the IFHP covers this so it's FREE!)
- Follow up orthodontic appointments for Lava (the orthodontist is going to provide treatments for FREE!)
- Kids are all in school already, including Asma (the eldest daughter) who requested the opportunity to do Gr12 despite her being graduated from high school back home (she had completed her first semester in University). Being in high school will benefit her language and allow her to meet friends. Yousif is too young for school but is already going to the Strong Start program with his mother, where she can meet friends too.
- All language assessments are done, some of Badran's family are higher than level one which is very helpful for them and us (translations can be challenging)
- New gym shoes purchased so they can participate in PE
- LINC language classes will be signed up for week commencing 8th May
They've been registered for 2 social events for Newcomers on 4th and 11th May to expand their social circle - dinner is included

Next on our agenda:

- Trying to get Badran's qualifications as a Laboratory Technician translated into English for assessment by Canadian Society for Medical Laboratory Science (CSMLS) thereafter we can fully address what can be done to have him re-train / upgrade so he can follow the same career path (he is 57 years old and has spent his entire working life as a Laboratory Technician in hospitals). I am working closely with MOSAIC on this piece.
- Ensuring that our teaching team follow through on giving additional lessons and conversation opportunity to both families to accelerate their English, this is particularly vital for Badran, Asma and Lava, plus Kawa, the others will have the benefit of several years in the schooling system or be stay at home mums and learn from their children, while the two Dad's need English to seek work and the two elder girls need better English to follow higher education.
- Keeping an eye on both families mental health situation - typically Newcomers go through a "honeymoon" period when they are just happy to be alive, safe, secure and settled, but then the frustration and difficulty of slowly learning a new language and the hard work that entails starts to erode their wellbeing somewhat. We are fortunate that summer is just around the corner and they will be able to enjoy the outdoors and good weather, plus we are very fortunate in that both of these families are what I would call "go getters" they are throwing themselves with great enthusiasm and humour into all of the appointments, plans and meetings we have arranged so far, long may that continue.