

Khamissas to be Aurora's voice during Canada 150 celebration



By Brock Weir

Back in her native South Africa, Aurora's Mae Khamissa has developed a bit of a reputation with her friends and family. Such is her love for her adopted homeland, one nephew teasingly dubbed her, 'Miss Beautiful Canada' for all the marvellous stories she has shared with them.

Now, 'Miss Beautiful Canada' has gone legit, with Mae and Raz Khamissa chosen to represent Aurora as part of the 'Canada 150 Community Leaders' program, hosted by the Federation of Canadian Municipalities.

The Khamissas, long-time owners of the venerable Omars Shoes, which was founded by Raz's father, Omar, nearly 50 years ago, were named to the position by Council last week.

The Canada 150 Leaders is intended to provide a nation-wide network acting as the 'Community Voice' for Canada's 150th Anniversary Celebrations in 2017, whether at local or larger-scale events, all the while sharing stories about their communities 'to create an insightful mosaic of our nation.'

'When they approached us, I thought it was a big deal and for us to be considered is pretty neat,' says Raz. 'I am so proud to be Canadian. We moved from South Africa almost 48 years ago and we have been so blessed to be living here. We are very blessed to have an opportunity to vote, to express our opinion, to disagree with someone else's opinion but still get a chance to discuss things. The freedom, the comfort level, the safety factor, there are so many things we're so lucky to be a part of here in Canada. My father was a very proud Canadian and I am glad to be considered to be following in his footsteps. For me, it really is an honour to be considered part of the Canadian celebration of 150 years.'

Mae sums up her feeling with one word: 'Pride.'

Over the last two years, Mae has been an active member of the Interfaith Refugee Resettlers, an interfaith group which has brought together members of Aurora United Church, Trinity Anglican Church, and the Newmarket Islamic Centre to sponsor groups of Syrian refugees to settle in the Aurora-Newmarket area.

A representative of the Newmarket Islamic Centre, Mae says the experience has helped her not only appreciate but redefine her sense of what it means to be Canadian.

'At Union Station recently there was a [newcomer] family that needed money to go to London, ON, and they didn't have enough,' she recalls. 'The people got together and started putting money into a pot and helped them get to London. In the last few years, there have been a number of new Canadians that I have been involved with and just the feedback I have had from them in such a short period of time [has been amazing].

'On Friday night, we did an overview [with the Syrian family we sponsored] and his view was, 'at first we were told this country was a dark place, it never gets sunny there, and it is cold all year round. We thought we would be treated like we were in the camps. We got here and there were people waiting for us at the airport to take us, when we got to the home there was a house full of people to welcome us, food was supplied for the longest period of time and it just doesn't stop. We have never seen this. We really expected to be treated badly, but we had no choice.'

They were afraid to make that leap, to take that chance, says Mae, but when they did, the community stepped up to make sure they felt comfortable and at ease in their new home.

?It makes me so proud that even someone who just stepped into this country six or eight months ago has already fallen in love with it,? she says. ?We know there are so many countries that can bring in people. There are so many refugees all over the world, and to know that we are willing to open our doors to people coming in. It just builds me into being more proud, and especially with this government right now I am very happy because we are showing our true side of what Canadians are and what we're really about and that makes me so happy.?

This is a sense shared by Raz as well, who said from his own family's immigrant experience they were ?treated with the utmost respect? as soon as they arrived in Canada.

?We were always treated with the utmost respect and people were so nice and good to us, and that is the reason why when new immigrants are coming now I take pride in the fact that is what Canadians do,? he says. ?They treat people well and they help them as much as they can. They bend over backwards to make things easy for them, because it is not easy moving to a whole new place.? And as for the teasing nephew?

Well, he arrived in Canada nearly five years ago and has come around to Miss Beautiful Canada's way of thinking. Now she gets to do the teasing.