

A new baby signals beginning of new chapter for sponsored Syrian family



By Brock Weir

A new life is the start of a new page in many a family's book, but for a local Syrian family, Sunday night marked the beginning of an important ? and exciting ? new chapter for them as they welcomed their first Canadian-born baby.

When they left Syria, this family of five ? a mom, Hanaa, dad Mehssen, and three kids, including a toddler ? had to walk for 22 days, often in perilous circumstances, to reach safety from their war-torn homeland.

Reaching the Jordanian border, the family did their very best to provide some level of comfort for their kids in very uncertain circumstances.

She was pregnant in the camp and by the time they were approached for a refugee opportunity in Canada, they were a family of six facing a crucial decision and, bravely, they decided to leap into the unknown.

They became the first Syrian refugee family sponsored by the Interfaith Refugee Resettlers (IRR), a group of volunteers from Aurora United Church, Trinity Anglican Church, and the Newmarket Islamic Centre.

?They were willing to go anywhere,? says Mae Khamissa, a founding member of the IRR, who was honoured to be selected as birthing coach for the mother of the as-yet-unnamed baby girl. ?Living in a hell hole for a while, you would want to go anywhere too. Once they said yes, they started getting really scared because people were saying, ?Oh, you're going to a country where the sun never comes out, where it is cold, dark and gloomy,? but they said for the first time they set foot down here it has been a positive, incredible and amazing experience.?

Jumping into the unknown is always a scary prospect, but they needn't have worried as they arrived at Pearson International Airport last winter. They were greeted by the warmth of IRR's enthusiasm who had excitedly been working on the family's living accommodations as soon as they received word their arrival was imminent.

Priority number one, says Ms. Khamissa, was enrolling them in classes and getting the help they needed to gain a working knowledge of English, all the while finding jobs.

They picked up the language pretty quickly, with the mother, Hanaa, becoming adept very early on.

?The kids are incredible too,? says Ms. Khamissa. ?You would think they are kids who grew up in Canada from Day 1 because their English is incredible and they have done very well in school as well.?

Now, there will be a new baby girl, Janah, to watch flourish in her family's newly adopted home.

?Grateful pride? is the phrase Ms. Khamissa uses to describe what it meant to be chosen as Hana's birthing coach.

?We take so many thing for granted,? says Ms. Khamissa, who came to Canada from South Africa. ?This brings it all back to how grateful we should be of what we have. These kids are going to have an incredible future, they are going to make something,

whereas who knows what would have happened if no one approached them from the Canadian government in those camps? Would they have had to turn around and go back to Syria and try and rebuild what was left of it? We just feel pride, joy, happiness and gratitude that they have a chance to have a good life.

?[This birth] is a miracle of life. This moment comes and you see this woman struggling through it, but then the moment comes and all the pain is forgotten. To participate was just an honour, and I am amazed to have experienced that.?

The IRR continues to thank everyone in the community who has supported their group in supporting this family.