

Syrian family "overwhelmed" by community outpouring

By Brock Weir

They were about an hour and a half from the nearest border by car when they realised they had to leave.

Settled in one stronghold, they knew they had to go through another stronghold just to reach that border. It took them 22 days with three children in tow, sleeping out in the elements and very clearly in danger. When they finally arrived at the border, it was three more days before they were given clearance to get into a refugee camp.

Over a year later, the family ? by now a family of six ? was approached by a group of English speakers with an interpreter asking if they would like to come to Canada.

All they had heard from people living in their camp was of Canada being a cold, dark country where the sun hardly ever shines but after so much turmoil and desperation, they were willing to give it a shot.

This Syrian family was welcomed at Pearson International Airport late last month by members of the Interfaith Refugee Resettlers (IRR), a group of volunteers from Aurora United Church, Trinity Anglican Church, and the Newmarket Islamic Centre.

And, at this point, that is really all we know about the journey this mother, father, and four children took to get here. Working with the international aid organization AURA, protocols are currently in place to protect the identity of the family as they settle into their new lives in the area, but the journey has left a lasting mark on the numerous volunteers ? both inside and outside the IRR and other faith communities ? who came together to help them plant roots.

?What's crazy was they had no idea people were waiting for them,? says Katherine Webster, a parishioner of Trinity. ?It blows our mind. It is so inspiring that they would get on a plane to a place that didn't sound particularly welcoming, thinking there was nothing for them here, nothing for them to count on, [no expectations] of a place to live, and to go ahead and do that with four children under the age of six??

Mae Khamissa, an Aurora resident and member of the Newmarket Islamic Centre, was on hand at the airport to welcome the family. When they left for Canada, the family heard no shortage of ?doom and gloom? stories about Canada, she says, but as they settle in, the family says they have found the exact opposite to be true.

?They are just so eager,? says Ms. Khamissa. ?One of the first things the dad said at the airport was, ?When do I start work?' We chuckled because it shows that they are not here to just sit and wait around. They basically want to get going. They wanted to get into the whole work mode, to help out, to get on their own two feet.

?They are just so blown away by the kindness from everybody and Canadians and how people are just willing to do things.?

So far, she says, the family has ?settled in beautifully.? The kids who are old enough are now enrolled at school, settling into the routine, and adapting nicely. They love it, says Ms. Khamissa, and they can't wait to go out every day to learn and be with their friends and teachers.

?This is coming from not having a whole lot to such an incredible, warm structure,? she says.

It took a bit of work, however, to pull this warm structure together.

The IRR ramped up efforts throughout the community to collect all the essentials ? from furniture to bedding ? to make a house a home. The volunteers came together to clean the apartment from top to bottom, hang curtains and shelves, and organize the incredible amount of donations received by the community at large.

?By [the time my husband put up the shelves] the dad was very much a part of this,? says Ms. Webster. ?He was there with the tools right along with us, helping to get the house ready, which is difficult because English is not the first language they speak, but he is learning very quickly. We are overwhelmed by the commitment from our communities. People who have nothing to do with the churches or the mosque have stepped up and are teaching ESL, are willing to show people around on transit and [those who speak Arabic] have offered their services as dentists and doctors taking on patients.

?People have a genuine desire to help with no thought of return and who genuinely have a gift for one particular aspect or two.?

While regulations prevent us from having a sit-down with the new local family, they have a message to send along to the members of the public who have helped them on their journey so far.

?They would like everyone to know how grateful they are and how amazed they are that strangers would have so much to offer,? says Ms. Khamissa. ?Coming off the plane and not knowing what this place is all about, who these people are, they found they instantly had a family and they are dumbfounded at that.

?They can't believe the kindness of strangers in this community as well.?