

"We can't be discouraged easily," say Our Lady of Grace refugee volunteers



By Brock Weir

The air was thick with the smell of bleach on Saturday as volunteers from Our Lady of Grace put some much-needed elbow grease into a nearby apartment.

Wiping down donated appliances and furnishings, they ended their long day making a run to Home Hardware to replace a few bolts on a double bedframe, also donated.

Soon all their hard work will be enjoyed by a few honoured guests as this committee of Our Lady of Grace (OLG) Catholic Church parishioners prepares to welcome a refugee family from Iraq, currently stranded in Lebanon, waiting to make their home in Canada.

"The family told me that since the Paris attacks, a number of flights to and from Western countries has decreased significantly to Lebanon," says Marina Nemat, a volunteer with OLG's refugee committee. "This will probably delay it a little bit, but we are certainly hoping they arrive before the holidays."

Ms. Nemat, who detailed her harrowing story of being imprisoned and tortured during the Iranian Revolution in her acclaimed memoir "Prisoner of Tehran", has been involved with the church's refugee work after answering the call of the Archdiocese of Toronto over five years ago.

Since that time, they have already sponsored two families: one, a family of three from Iraq and the second, another family from Iraq stranded in Libya.

"They were settled in Aurora and within a few months they had jobs, they just did so well and we were so proud of them," says Ms. Nemat. "Now, our new family has been okayed, they have had their finger prints, now they are just waiting because the government provides them with plane tickets. I just talked to them over the weekend on Skype and they are just waiting."

The waiting game might be longer than they had anticipated due to the attacks, but the OLG community has not let rhetoric put them off their efforts.

"Our committee is so dedicated they can't be discouraged easily," says Ms. Nemat. "There are some very negative and even racist people out there. I have a Facebook author page and I had to take some of the [comments] out because they were just downright racist. I give an average of two or three talks a week at high schools and I was at one school this week with all these innocent, lovely kids and one of them asked why we were advocating for bringing refugees here if they are terrorists."

"My answer is this: in every population there are sociopaths, there are killers, there are murderers and rapists, there are terrorists and if you look at the history of terrorism, a lot of the terrorist acts committed let's say in the United States, a lot of them were committed by, I should say, 'old stock' Americans. Your nationality or your religion doesn't make you a bad person."

If a terrorist wants to come to Canada, they are not going to get on rickety boats to get here, she says. They have resources, can pay a lot of money, and can come here on a normal visa. Believing a country like Canada can stop terrorism by refusing refugees is a 'huge mistake', she adds, because then terrorists have 'robbed us of our humanity and they are dominating us by creating fear.'

'I am not going to allow that to happen,' she says. 'I am going to stand in their way and say, 'I am not scared of you. The majority of these refugees are vulnerable, innocent people who need help and this is what my experience tells me. The majority of them are just very good people like you and me.'

If Ms. Nemat is going to stand in their way, she is not standing alone. She has a team of fellow volunteers standing with her also doing the work, undertaking the training to work with their incoming family, building support networks of local people who speak Farsi, and seeking donations from within the Aurora community and beyond to make their first Canadian home a welcoming one.

So far, the donations have been 'jaw-dropping', she says, but once they arrive, job number one will be helping to acclimatize them in their new community. They will take them out to introduce them to Aurora, plan trips down to Toronto to familiarize them with resources available, secure health cards, drivers' licenses and a place at a family doctor. The family includes one 16-year-old boy who will need to be registered in a local high school and while this group is currently flush with furniture and other donations, Ms. Nemat says the community at large can help in little ways that will ultimately make a big difference to these lives ultimately starting over in our Town.

'It has been such a rewarding, fantastic experience and it really brings the community together,' she says, noting the group is sponsoring two additional families from Ivory Coast. 'What we need more than anything from Aurora is to be welcoming. Aurora is a welcoming town, but with the Paris attacks and all the negativity in the world, we just need to show them that we do not use racism and prejudice. The best thing is to just be open and welcoming.'

'After their English gets better in a few months, our main obstacle is going to be finding them jobs. When I started in Canada, I got a job at McDonalds and then Swiss Chalet. It is the same thing with these people. Just to get them their first Canadian job and their first paycheque gives them hope. I think that is what they need more than anything: hope, love and acceptance.'

And, although a cheque is a good contribution to any number of volunteer organizations helping to welcome refugees, you don't even have to go that far.

'Be creative with your talents,' she says. 'If you are a music teacher, why not come to our committee in Aurora and offer free music lessons to any of them? Look at the talent you have and think about how you can share those specific talents with people who have had much less than us and come from a difficult place.'