

You don't need to "reinvent the wheel" to help Syrian refugees, say former sponsors



By Brock Weir

Last month, Aurora residents Annabelle Black, along with Lynn and Clarke Edward were at the wedding of a man who, over the past 35 years, has become part of their extended family.

They first met each other when the man was a boy of two, arriving in Aurora on a blustery December night in 1979, along with his family, who had little more than the shirts on their backs.

"As I sat and looked at all those people at this wedding, I thought of all the people who said to us when we started out, 'You can't make a difference. Bringing over one family isn't going to make a difference,'" says Ms. Edward. "I looked at this room full of people and thought, 'You're never going to tell me again that doing one thing can't make a difference to a lot of people.'"

In 1979, the Edwards, Ms. Black, and Beverley Wood were just four of 13 members of the Trinity Anglican Church community who came together to sponsor one refugee family from amongst the thousands of individuals who have come to be colloquially known as the Vietnamese Boat People.

Over 35 years on, when they turn on their TVs or look in newspapers, the images stemming from the ongoing Syrian refugee crisis bring up mixed emotions – often a sense of frustration tinged with sadness that more isn't being done to help their plight.

"What is making me angry is we did this back in 1979," says Ms. Edward the numerous communities across the country who sponsored thousands following that crisis. "This is not something new that has never been done by the Canadian people. Everything was in place and everything should still be there. It is absolutely unforgivable this has happened. There is absolutely no excuse for what is going on. It shouldn't be up to the churches to do it. The churches can't do it without government permission and backing."

While Ms. Black chalks the political response to the government being concerned about "losing the redneck vote", Ms. Wood says everything is in place and there is no need to "reinvent the wheel."

"This situation has really affected my way of thinking and my way of looking at the present government situation, of people's thoughts of what is a priority in people's minds. I then have to ask myself why this is happening right now, why there has been such an incredible surge from Iraq and Syria," says Ms. Wood. "You can hear things, see things, feel things in so many different ways to what we had back in 1978 and 1979. Yes, we have to do something, but what is practical? What help are we getting other than our initial feelings of getting things going? We have to do something and I think each person can by recognizing what they can do that is

practical. Not all of us have bundles of money we can toss out, but we have to have that sense of working with others.?

In that first crisis, there was a very different landscape, says Ms. Black, and that included a Prime Minister and Immigration Minister that were on board, providing groups like theirs with ?a good umbrella.? Their efforts were spurred by the Trinity priest at the time who laid out the situation in one Sunday sermon, challenging the congregation to meet up afterwards and come together with a solution.

They weren't technically sponsored by Trinity, but that sermon was the spark.

?What the Priest made clear was a group like this could do something, do something definite, and with the sense there is support out there for you,? says Mr. Edward.

The first step was to get 10 people to sign up as sponsors. They had just eight people at that initial meeting, but were eventually able to subscript the balance, and more, bringing their total to 13. That spring, they filled out their application forms, ticking off the option of sponsoring a family of up to 10 individuals if that was an option, not content by this point to do anything by halves.

?We had to collect up all the furniture, rent a house for them, and we had to know how big of a house we needed,? recalls Ms. Black.

Adds Ms. Edward: ?When they got here, Bev looked after their education issues. I was the only one who wasn't working at the time, just at home with the children, so I was the one who did the daily back and forth. We decided how much money they needed each week for groceries and made sure they got the cash each week.?

Then the call came that December the Li family had arrived, and the group loaded up the cars, trudging out to the snow to pick them up at Pearson International Airport to settle them into their new Aurora home that night. Not quite ready with all their provisions, they spent that first night getting to know each other over a hot meal at what was then the Moon Garden Chinese restaurant.

To this day, the sponsors reminisce and smile about the trials and tribulations they all went through ? the Lis included ? to break down cultural and language barriers, eventually becoming one large, blended family in the process. They still regularly meet, not just at weddings, but each Christmas, recently returning to break bread at Moon Garden.

The sponsors share a particular pride that this closeness remains and they revel in the milestones shared by their sponsored family, including one of the then-children joining the ranks of the Toronto Police Service, serving the community of what is now his home.

?I am smiling because there were a lot of challenges, questions, and so on, but we did enjoy ourselves,? says Ms. Wood. ?It was such a wonderful learning experience for us right from the beginning. That is the feeling I remember: how we all cared enough about each other as well as our incoming family. I think for me, it was a very important lesson in how to listen and listen not only with my heart but my eyes and ears.?

Adds Ms. Edward: ?If I had the chance to do it for a Syrian family, I would.?

?Me too, without question,? adds Ms. Wood.