

Mississauga parish helps families adjust to a new life



*Written by Sheila Dabu Nonato, The Catholic Register
Tuesday, 20 April 2010 09:35*

<http://www.catholicregister.org/iraqi-exodus/mississauga-parish-helps-families-adjust-to-a-new-life/itemid-632>



Larry Elmer, chair of St. Dominic's Church's Resettlement Committee, is joined by program co-ordinator Beverly Carpenter and Dana, Dina and Fawaz Fatohi, who fled Baghdad because of persecution in Iraq. (Photo by Sheila Dabu Nonato)

Mississauga, ON. - In Iraq, they lived under the threat of bombs and bullets. In Canada, Fawaz Fatohi says his daughter Dana is free to play in the park as any five-year-old should.

Fatohi's family was sponsored last year by St. Dominic's parish in Mississauga, Ont. They had been living as refugees in Syria after fleeing Iraq.

St. Dominic's parishioners say helping refugee families come to Canada is just part of who they are as a faith community. The experience, from both sides, has been rewarding.

"We belong to one community of humanity," says Larry Elmer, chair of St. Dominic's Resettlement Committee.

Parish staff worker Beverly Carpenter co-ordinates the parish's resettlement program. St. Dominic's has been sponsoring families since 1979 from countries like Afghanistan, Vietnam, Indonesia and Sierra Leone. Asked why they do it, Carpenter responds: "How could we not?"

It's been rewarding to see the successes of the 50 families who have been sponsored by the parish, she added.

"I think it's wonderful that more and more parishes are taking a deep breath and rolling up their sleeves and (are becoming) involved in this because it's something that's really needed," Carpenter said.

The resettlement committee provides a wide range of support for each refugee family. Parishioners meet the family at the airport, prepare welcome gifts, assist with temporary housing and provide furniture and household needs, largely through donations from parishioners. Volunteers also help the family with Canadian paperwork, such as school enrolment, obtaining social insurance cards and setting up a bank account, as well as introducing family members to language, job search and training courses. There is also some financial support that comes through fundraising at two annual bazaars.

For Fatohi's family, leaving Iraq was a matter of life or death. Fawaz, 36, and Dina, 32, lived through the two Persian Gulf wars and the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Before fleeing to Syria in 2007, Fawaz worked at a Turkish-owned oil company and Dina worked as a bank teller in Baghdad.

They fled when Fawaz received an envelope containing a knife and an anonymous note saying, "If you don't leave Iraq, you will be killed."

Not long after receiving the threatening letter, Fawaz packed up the family belongings and drove to Damascus, Syria, joining his mother, who had fled earlier. He applied to bring his family to Canada as refugees on June 6, 2008 and arrived on Nov. 25, 2009.

Adjustment to Canadian life has brought culture shock and homesickness.

“In the beginning, all refugees think (life) is hard, but it’s okay,” Dina said. Life in Canada is so much better than living in a war zone, she added. Dina hopes her parents, who are still in Syria, can also come to Canada.

When Fawaz and Dina took their daughter into the catechism class at St. Joseph (Syriac) Church one Saturday, Carpenter recalls Fawaz saying, “Everybody in Baghdad is here.”

It’s important to find and nurture these connections for new families, says Carpenter. Carpenter and the resettlement committee try to find apartments for the refugee families where there are neighbours who speak the same language.

During the past month, Fawaz found part-time work at a pizza factory and Dina graduated to level 3 in her English classes at the Newcomer Centre of Peel.

Despite the challenges of learning a new language and getting accustomed to living in Canada, the family says they have much to be grateful for here, especially the support of the St. Dominic’s community.

From the parish’s perspective, sponsorship comes with challenges. It normally takes two years to process paperwork — although Fawaz’s family was a special case that was processed in three months.

The process began with St. Dominic’s Resettlement Committee contacting the Office for Refugees at the Archdiocese of Toronto to express interest in sponsoring a family. The committee meets four times a year to either choose another family to sponsor, work on the process of sponsoring a family to Canada or assist a sponsored family already in Canada.