

West Island Refugee Network

Notes of the Meeting of March 15, 2016 at Summerlea United Church

15 adults and 2 children were present:

- Summerlea United - Sinclair Harris & John Osborne
- Merging Waters - Rosalie Armstrong
- Lakeshore UU Congregation - Sheila Laursen, Susan Czarnocki, Christopher Thomson & Rev. Heather Fraser Fawcett (also from RIVO- Resilience)
- Dorval Mosque - Mehmet Deger, Engin Alkan Deger, and guest Mine Yalcin and children
- Cedar Park United - Cathie Weldon & Andrea Nugent
- Resurrection of our Lord - Jim Newman
- Mohammad Shaban, Syrian refugee and Abdulkarim Alshami, resident

1. Each person introduced him/herself, and Sheila thanked Mehmet Deger, the President of the Dorval mosque for coming to share their experiences with us. His wife and her sister and children have accompanied him.

2. Updates

- a) Resurrection of our Lord and St. Veronica's Catholic parishes - Jim reported that now have been assigned a multigenerational family of 5 from Aleppo and in Lebanon since 2012, to sponsor through the Catholic Diocese. The family includes the grandmother, her 62 year old son, his daughter and her husband and their 11 year old daughter. They are holding a fundraising concert with St. Michael's Boys Choir from Toronto on Wednesday April 6. Admission is \$25. The poster will be distributed through our network.
- b) Summerlea Refugee Sponsorship Coalition - a fundraising concert was held at Summerlea United on March 12. \$1,000 was raised at the door, and a donation from an individual in Vancouver brought in another \$1,000!
- c) Cedar Park United - has been matched with a Syrian family through Action Réfugiés Montréal. There are family members living in the West Island - two sisters, one a Human Rights worker, and the other a journalist. They are very happy to be working with Cedar Park to bring their family members to Montreal.

3. Sponsorship Experiences of the Dorval Mosque

Mehmet Deger, President of the Dorval Mosque told us of the long history of the mosque in sponsoring refugees. When they brought 33 Bosnians here in the past, the cost was just \$7,000 per person. Now the government requires \$24,000 to be available for 12 months to bring in a family of 2 adults, and another \$1,300 per child under 18 years of age.

It is good that refugees now arrive with Permanent Resident status, which makes the adults eligible for work. Mehmet noted that there are plenty of jobs available in Montreal and area, although it is not easy to find one that matches the refugees capacities and skills. Mehmet introduced Mohammad Shaban, who accompanied him to this meeting. Mohammad is a recently-arrived refugee from Syria, trained as an

Accountant, but not able to find work in that field yet. He is happy to have found a job in a Montreal bakery for now.

Mehmet noted that when the adults take government French classes, they are each paid \$150 per week, with each course level lasting 11 weeks. The family also received an allowance for each child. Those combined revenue can often cover the cost of rent and food for the family, and the sponsor covers the other costs until work is found.

There has been confusion about whether refugee families have to repay the cost of their plane fare to Montreal over 5 years. Mehmet had a meeting with Liberal MPs recently to pressure them to cancel that transport cost as it means they begin life in Canada with a debt to be repaid.

Mehmet also had some recommendations that could help to speed the process for sponsors wishing to bring a refugee family. He said the family needs to have UNHCR certification, plus a phone number where they can be reached, plus a permanent address so they can receive mail. The Canadian Immigration staff need to be able to find and contact the family for appointments, information requests, etc. Mehmet suggested that our local Member of Parliament could also help to speed the process of approval by making contact with Canadian Immigration officials overseas.

4. Two Requests for Sponsorship Support

1) Mehmet Deger described a family that would welcome sponsorship help to bring their family members from Syria to Montreal. Here is a resumé of their situation sent later by Mehmet:

“The family has 6 members. Father, mother and 4 kids. There is a sponsoring family related to this family but their income is not sufficient according to government norms. We need a person or family who has a income of \$35,000 dollars or more **or** (*funding from*) a charitable organization like a church.

Sponsoring family is speaking Arabic and they will help them. But they cannot sign the official documents because their income is not sufficient. Dorval Mosque is also going to help. Our (*Dorval mosque*) money is tied for the other six families that we are going to bring.

When the family is accepted it takes 6 – to – 8 months for them to come. On arrival they will be permanent residents. Therefore they are entitled to child support and French course. The money they get from these sources will be sufficient for them. We usually find work for them so they can work extra hours and support the family.”

Sheila offered to forward this request to a church that had expressed interest in helping to support refugees wishing to come to Canada.

2) Abdulkarim Alshami then described his request for support. He is a Montreal resident who originally came from Syria to study at McGill. He wants to bring his

mother and brother, who are now in Morocco, to Canada, and he has saved \$18,000 to do that. However, the government demands proof of annual income higher than he has, so he is seeking a partner individual, group, or church to provide the financial capacity required by the government.

5. One Syrian Family's Experiences

Mohammad Shaban began by saying, "I would like to thank you and to thank everyone of the attendees for your efforts to help the Syrian families.

I was living with my family that consists of (father, mother, me, brother, young sister, elder sister with her husband and their two daughters). By the way my elder sister and her husband with their daughters were displaced from AL-Yarmouk Camp and they were living with us in our apartment in Damascus which is more safe than other Syrian cities, because it's the capital and it still controlled by the Syrian government. But even the capital was not safe. Sometimes mortar shells fell down.

In this situation we decided to apply for immigration Canada. But our applications were rejected by the federal government. We applied again and we were sponsored by a Canadian family in Quebec, the result was a successful attempt. We moved to Lebanon on 1-9-2015. We stayed there for three months and 23 days then and finally we traveled to Canada on 23-12-2015.

It is like an uprooted tree when someone leave his country, but meeting such good people like you will give us hope and optimism."

Mohammad is a trained accountant, and is currently working in a bakery. He is grateful for having work, even if it is not related to his training.

6. A West Island Fundraising Concert Offer

Sheila reported that an interesting offer has been made as a result of the media publicity for the Heart to Heart spaghetti dinner and dance at Union Church on Feb. 13, 2016 to raise funds to sponsor a Syrian refugee family to come to Montreal.

The offer came from Ely Bonder, a member of the musical group "Musical Chairs" and one of the organizers of a successful fundraiser held in January at the Dorshei Emet Synagogue in Hampstead. The concert, which included Western and Syrian folk traditions, was a musical celebration that attracted 400 people and raised \$5,000 towards the Congregation of Dorshei Emet's sponsorship of four Syrian refugee families.

Ely has offered to help us organize a similar event in the West Island - and told us that the Syrian musician and his own "Musical Chairs" group would be prepared to participate.

Of course, finding a venue, the necessary equipment for sound and lighting, and managing the promotion, ticket sales, etc is a lot of work - but if a good team works on this, it would be a huge success here too!

This offer is open.....would any of you like to work with Ely to make this type of concert a West Island reality? Just let me (Sheila) know - Ely is waiting to hear back from us!

Sheila Laursen