

The Host Program

There are estimated to be between 10 and 15 million refugees in the world; 75% of that number are women and children. The federal government will bring about 12,000 to Canada this year. What about those women? What about the Host Program?

The Host Program is a simple and direct way for you and me to welcome new immigrants and refugees to Canada. It is a national program — there are about a dozen projects and hundreds of people actively involved between Vancouver and Moncton. It is funded by the Canada Employment and Immigration Commission and sponsored by various settlement and social service agencies. Although it must adhere to a few fundamental guidelines, each Host Program has developed autonomously according to local need.

The primary focus is to help newcomers and Canadians adapt to each other by spending a few hours, spread over a few months getting to know each other. When refugee/immigrant families or individuals arrive in Canada, they are understandably nervous, confused and frightened. They are, after all, outsiders in what can be perceived as a cold, impersonal society. Yet members of that society can be equally nervous, confused and frightened when faced with the newcomers. Immigration is a two way process. Immigrants arrive and begin their adjustment to their host community, but that host community also must adjust to their arrival and its absorption of the new immigrants. One process cannot occur independently of the other. Transition is stressful for everyone. Only human “connectedness”



Refugee family being greeted upon arrival by their Canadian host family

BY HEATHER MACDONALD

relieves the stress of adjustment — the human connection, the links that cross the cultures are especially effective. Who can better welcome the single Salvadorean mother to her Canadian community than a single Canadian mother? How better can that Canadian woman gain an appreciation of what it is to adjust to a new culture?

The Host Program connects small groups of people: a single newcomer or “family” with two to three Canadians or “families.” It is a voluntary association ensuring, therefore, basic equality. Both the newcomer and her host have chosen to be involved with each other. The newcomer chooses to participate in the program knowing she will see her Canadian friends about an hour a week over the next five to seven months. The Canadians, on their part, share the commitment and the weekly visits — the language practice sessions, the walks in the park, the trips to the grocery store, the “doing nothing but being” together. In the process, both parties come to know and appreciate each other’s culture and, I would hope, have fun doing so. Relationships and, in particular, the cross-cultural relationship, are not without their frustrations and their joys. If there are two qualities required of participants and hosts, I would say they are sensitivity and a particular kind of humour (being able to laugh at themselves).

Ostensibly, the Host Program began as a means to encourage language acquisition, employment access and an awareness of Canadian customs and practices among the government assisted refugees. It has done just that. Yet many of the hosts would insist they are the ones to have benefitted. They have witnessed the courage, the determination, the convictions and the resilience of their new friends. In the process, they have learned much about the newcomers’ culture and perhaps their own culture. In numerous cases (when requested) hosts intervened to assist with schooling, employment, financial management, medical attention, and landlord-tenancy disputes. For some, it was a chance to experience our “systems” from the newcomers’ perspective — both the good and the bad. For others, it was a chance to involve their families in a real life learning situation. As one young Canadian mother said, “It was an eye opening for all of us. It has been a good experience for our kids (three of them) to see people who come from somewhere else with nothing. It makes us appreciate all we have, including a peaceful country.” Andrew, her nine year-old son, would add that he especially welcomed the soccer training he received from his Salvadorean “Uncle.”

Real friendships can grow from that awkward and contrived host-newcomer

introduction. Of course, friendship is not always the outcome, but even the superficial relationships do make a significant difference. Hosted newcomers report a higher level of comfort in their new home — less isolation and more familiarity with the local customs. They appreciate the fact that someone took the time to explain the Easter Bunny, Halloween, and Santa Claus — even if it didn’t make sense. They appreciate more the fact that a friend tried to explain our social, employment, and legal systems. But when the conversation turns to issues of women’s rights, domestic violence, and parental discipline, considerable sensitivity and tact are needed. Hosts have to be aware of their own cultural bias in these areas and of the counter-effect their biased advice could produce. Abuse and discipline have to be clearly defined and differentiated, parental roles respected, and the cultural patterning of men and women’s roles accepted.

The Jones and the Smiths were the ideal match for the Lopez family. Carol Smith was a nurse. Luisa Lopez needed a guide to make sense of our medical system. All three families had children about the same age. The Jones and the Smiths had much to offer and were pleased to be able to help. However, a barbecue that was held to celebrate their relationship inadvertently and regrettably became its very undoing. Humour does not transcend culture easily. Jose’s presumption that Luisa would serve him his food at a casual barbecue struck Ann Jones and Carol Smith as a joke. They, in turn, made some humorous references to their own husbands’ presumptions. Both Jose and Luisa were hurt by this cultural *faux pas*. Ann and Carol, although they tried, could not salvage the situation.

It was a painful lesson, but one that needs to be shared so that a repeat can be avoided. Other refugee women have been more fortunate — or more desperate, as the case may be. Juanita arrived with her four children to join her husband after a two year absence. As he was unable to meet her at the airport, Juanita had time alone with the federal settlement officer. While still at the airport she made known her fear of living with her husband, her confusion and desperate panic. She was a “high risk newcomer” and, as such, warranted professional help. But she needed friends. A Host group of older, maternal women provided just that and supported her through a time of difficult decision. It wasn’t easy, but it was worthwhile.

There are many other Juanitas and Luisas among the Khmer, Ethiopian, Vietnamese, and African women. They and the women who “hosted/befriended” them have contributed to the success both

of the Host Program and of Canada. I do not believe any of the relationships were failures, although I know some have been painful. Janet and Sareth were the best of friends, visited each other frequently, and watched each other in awe as they both tried to imitate “appropriate behaviour.” When the Khmer family decided they must relocate to join extended family in another city, Janet and Sareth spent an afternoon of tearful farewells. They could never speak English easily with one another, but they could communicate. Because of Sareth, Janet felt she should host a second Khmer Family. Long and Lin eagerly accepted their host group (Janet, Dorothy, Alice, and Chris), but it became apparent that Lim felt overwhelmed and frightened by the “noisy” Canadians. Her nervous silence accentuated their nervous chatter which, in turn, caused her to retreat further. The presence of her family didn’t help. Finally, we spoke with Long, her husband, and we decided her hosts should withdraw. They wait ready to resume the relationship when and if Lim chooses to do so; and Janet grieves for the aborted friendship.

Mary and her young daughter, recently arrived from Uganda, are actively involved in the community through their hosts. The group helped Mary find a comfortable, affordable apartment near their homes, have oriented her to the city and resources in which she identified an interest, and included her and her child in their activities. A few weeks ago, Mary and Susan, her host, attended a workshop together. Mary was the major contributor. Without a host group, Mary would not be aware of such events, nor would she have the confidence at this early stage of her adjustment to participate and share her strengths. Without the Host Program, Nora would not know the joy of her Khmer “grandchildren” nor would they experience a grandmother. If the program had not introduced them — that stubborn independent Iranian girl and that stubborn independent Sandra — who would they have to argue and laugh with, as their personalities and their cultures tested each other?

There are many ways to support immigrant/refugee women. One way is to offer her support through the Host Program, in a relationship that affirms her as an individual, through her family or through her children. With that support the refugee woman will grow, although in her own fashion, as will the host. Settlement services and professional intervention all can be “bought” for the government-assisted refugee, but the human networks, the cross cultural links, the acceptance — only you and I can provide that, woman-to-woman, family-to-family.