

# EMBASSY

## Opening doors: How Toronto supports needy newcomers

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TORONTO—Semhar and her younger brother, Thomas, know how to appreciate a trip to the movies.

“[We had] never been to a movie theatre before,” Semhar, 22, said in a soft, calm voice on Feb. 7.

“When I was back home, I would wish to go to a movie,” Thomas said.

Semhar arrived in Canada from Saudi Arabia seeking refugee status almost a year ago, joining two siblings who were already here. Thomas joined them a few months later.

These aren’t their real names. They asked that they not be revealed to protect their family back home.

Movie theatres, which are a rarity in Saudi Arabia, snow, skating and walking through downtown Toronto crowds were among the new experiences the siblings had in Canada.

“I fell down more than 20 times,” Thomas said of their skating outing, while his sister let out a chuckle.

“We have one sister who likes to push,” Semhar said.

Their lives have been anything but ordinary, but their playful sibling banter adds a sense of normalcy to their situation.

### **My house is your house**

They were both seated at the FCJ Refugee Centre, which helps asylum seekers through the immigration process and with anything else they need such as housing, counselling or learning English.

Francisco Rico-Martinez and his wife, Loly Rico, who fled El Salvador for Canada as refugees 25 years ago, run the centre out of their home. Mr. Rico-Martinez said their lives had been in danger and that he was targeted and tortured because of his work investigating human rights abuses.

“So when I open the door to people, I open my house to people,” said Mr. Rico-Martinez, who spoke by phone from El Salvador on Feb. 6. “So anybody that appears in our house...they have needs and we try to help them in any way that we can.”

One of the rooms was blocked off on Feb. 7 for a couple and their two children who had landed in Canada the day before and had nowhere to go. It was a Saturday and the house was busy with a steady flow of people. Many were refugees who had come to visit the medical clinic in the basement.

Ms. Rico, who is also the president of the advocacy group the Canadian Council for Refugees, said they started the health clinic in 2012 after the Conservative government announced cuts to refugee health care—a move that the Federal Court struck down. The government has since filed an appeal.

Mr. Rico-Martinez said the most challenging thing is the “silence” of society about some of the injustices refugees face.

“Our [refugee] system was considered one of the best systems on earth. Now it’s totally destroyed,” he said. “The refugees are processed very fast...they are trying to reduce the access to health [care] that they have.”

A 2012 law prompted the fast-tracking of asylum claimants through the system from countries the federal government has deemed generally safe.

The Harper government has said it needed to change the system to cut the big backlog and process people truly in need of protection faster.

Mr. Rico-Martinez said he and his wife wanted to help refugees just as they had been helped by a group of nuns, the Faithful Companions of Jesus, when they arrived.

The husband-and-wife team now has three other homes where they provide shelter to women and children, while also accompanying victims of human trafficking through the process of being able to stay in Canada safely, he said.

“I think it’s not my work anymore, it’s kind of my lifestyle,” Ms. Rico said. “And I believe that if you start with that open door...it’s the right step to move forward in your life in Canada.”

Semhar, whose family roots lie in Eritrea, said she left Saudi Arabia to avoid the living conditions there and to try to find a place she could call home.

“Many young women coming from Saudi Arabia, [it] is because they never can develop themselves professionally, because they have never been accepted as part of that country,” Ms. Rico said of the conservative Persian Gulf state.

Semhar said she was lucky to have two siblings here when she arrived.

Even so, it’s been difficult to adjust. “It’s just that you’re used to your family, you’re used to your parents, and all of a sudden here it’s different people,” Semhar said. “But I have people—I have you and everyone else. They’re more like family,” Semhar said as she leaned in and smiled at Ms. Rico.

The constant processing of papers was challenging. But the centre helped her apply for a work permit, for example.

“You get stressed a lot just because you have to adjust to a whole lot of new things,” said Semhar. But the centre’s youth group and other programs help relieve stress, she said.

Thomas said the hardest part was the first few months, but then he started to get used to life in Canada.

“I’m a diabetic person, so back home my mom used to take care of me. But when I’m here...my sister, she does a lot of healthy food, green food, and I really appreciate that,” he said while Semhar smiled shyly.

“But it can never be like a mother’s,” she replied.

The two are hoping they can bring the rest of their family to Canada as well.

“Things don’t always work as we plan; getting visas and stuff, it’s hard,” she said.

Despite their struggles, the siblings remain optimistic. Semhar’s dream is to study nursing and then become a doctor.

### **Heartbreaking phone calls**

Immigrants accounted for almost half of Toronto's population in 2011, so it's no surprise the city and surrounding regions are home to a myriad of organizations and programs helping newcomers.

In 2014-15, the federal immigration department gave Ontario \$297 million for immigrant settlement services.

Like FCJ, some groups have attracted staff members who were once refugees themselves.

Adeena Niazi is one of them. She is executive director and co-founder of the Afghan Women's Organization, which serves newcomers from Afghanistan as well as Iran, Central Asia, the Middle East and Pakistan, especially those who have experienced war or violence in their home countries.

Ms. Niazi came to Canada as a government-sponsored refugee when the former Soviet Union occupied her home country, Afghanistan.

While she arrived with several degrees and experience working for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in India, she had a hard time finding a job.

"I didn't find a space where I could share my problems and have support," Ms. Niazi said.

She helped start a small counselling group that evolved into the Afghan Women's Organization. Operating for 25 years, it sponsors refugees and supports 90 part-time and full-time staff members.

They work to integrate clients into society, helping them get into the job market, for instance, or escorting them to places like the library or City Hall.

"The impact of war and violence is very deep on their lives," Ms. Niazi said. "Some of them, because they are coming from war-torn countries, especially for the women, they have not been exposed to the outside world much...because they are confined in their homes because of the safety and security."

Ms. Niazi receives calls from women all over the world including refugee camps.

"It is not easy...but it's also rewarding," she said. "When you feel that they have somebody to talk to, if you feel that they are feeling comfortable with you and then you feel you can assist them somehow, it's really rewarding and somehow motivating and energizing."

Some phone calls are distressing.

A young Afghan woman with three children called in February 2014, she said. After her husband was killed, her in-laws were trying to marry her off to one of her husband's brothers, who was already married. She escaped to Pakistan, from where she called Ms. Niazi.

"It was really heartbreaking, but I could do nothing because in Islamabad the sponsorships were closed," she said.

A 2013 background note from the Canadian Council for Refugees states that the government caps the number of applications for privately sponsored refugees processed through some locations, including Islamabad.

Ms. Niazi recently heard that the girl's in-laws had taken her back and that she would likely have to marry her brother-in-law.

"[This] is always [one] I think of and then I feel so bad that I couldn't do anything for her," said Ms. Niazi.

Despite the work of organizations like Ms. Niazi's and the FCJ Refugee Centre, some vulnerable immigrants closer to home slip through the cracks.

In late 2014, Zahra Abdille, 43, and her sons, Faris, 13, and Zain, 8, were found dead in their Toronto apartment. Hours earlier, Ms. Abdille's husband and the boys' father, Yusuf, was killed after jumping from a nearby bridge onto a highway. The Toronto Star reported that Ms. Abdille had fled East Africa for Canada in the late 1990s and married Mr. Abdille in Toronto. She had no immediate family in Canada and little support.

Ms. Abdille and her sons had sought refuge from abuse at a women's shelter for several weeks in 2013, the shelter's director said, according to media reports. The director said she thought Ms. Abdille was trapped living with her husband because she was earning too much to qualify for affordable housing on her own, but not enough to afford a place on the private market.

### **'You don't ask them their immigration status'**

Sergeant Bassegy Osagie with the Toronto Police Service says domestic abuse isn't particular to one community or another, but runs across communities he deals with in overseeing a newcomer outreach program and community outreach in general.

"When they are new in the country, their husband or wife beats them, they are afraid to call the police," Sgt. Osagie said.

"Newcomers you're more soft with, because you want to encourage them [to report incidents]," he said. "You don't want to scare them away."

"That's why we have a policy: you don't ask them their immigration status," he said. "[They fear being] sent back home."

With other government authorities, that's not always the case. Last August, 21 undocumented workers were arrested during vehicle safety spot checks. The Ontario Provincial Police and officials from the provincial transportation ministry, along with the Canada Border Services Agency tag-teamed in the vehicle safety blitz in Toronto. Critics called it an abuse of power. The transportation officials and OPP said they weren't involved in the immigration checks, and the transportation minister asked officials to review protocols for working with other agencies.

The Toronto Police Service has what it calls chief consultative committees for specific communities including for Muslims, South Asians, and LGBTQ groups.

Each committee is made up of two police officers and members of the community. They may ask the police to give presentations. A few months ago, for instance, the Tamil community requested a workshop on elder abuse, said Sgt. Osagie.

The police service shows a video to newcomers with information about a person's rights when dealing with the police, what to do in the event of an emergency and how to report incidents.

"We understand that a lot of the newcomers came from a country where police are very hostile. And we want them to realize we're not like that, that's not how we do business here," Sgt. Osagie said.

He acknowledged that the video alone wouldn't change perceptions, but rather it would create awareness.

"At least we open the door for them so that if they ever do need our assistance, they know we are there for them."

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