

# At the Intersection of Syria and Canada

It was my daughter's idea. She had seen the heartbreaking images of Alan Kurdi, the little boy who had drowned trying to escape the war in Syria, his lifeless body washed up on a Turkish beach. Dressed in shorts and a t-shirt, he was still wearing his sneakers.

A few weeks later Justin Trudeau announced that Canada would accept 25,000 Syrian refugees by the end of February 2016, a number that has since grown to 40,000. When the local CBC reported that several hundred refugees would be coming to Fredericton in less than a month and that the Multicultural Association was desperate for volunteers, we also learned that we were not social workers or care providers, as First Fredericton Friends we were to be just that: friends.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines a friend as "a person with whom one has developed a close and informal relationship of mutual trust and intimacy." It's as good a definition as any but it doesn't fully capture the friendship that has developed between the Albrdians and the Wrights: from the moment we greeted them at the airport we have been on a journey without a destination.

We spent our first nights together playing simple card games and exchanging basic words in English and Arabic: hello, thank you, winter, snow, and cold. It was 44° when they left Jordan and -15° when they landed in Fredericton. On one of our first nights together I brought an atlas. They showed me their city in Syria and I showed them their new city in Canada. They were struck by the enormous distances separating New Brunswick from British Columbia. "Canada?" Qassim asked incredulously, running his finger from east to west.

Using Google translate, Qassim and Manal shared their story. The war came to their city in 2012, forcing them to leave everything, their house, their gardens, their possessions. The women and children were packed into overcrowded cars and driven to Jordan while the men escaped the shelling by walking into the mountains and crossing the border on foot under the cover of darkness. A few weeks later, families were re-united in the refugee camps. Of course, some weren't. Not everyone made it across the border. "We have had dark days," Qassim said. But, he added, "we are lucky." It's one of his favourite words. Today, Qassim and Manal are thriving: their English has progressed immeasurably, due in part to the efforts of Linda Kealey who has worked with them for over a year.

One of my projects with the Albrdians has been to teach them about Canada, its history and its geography. For Christmas, I gave Qassim and Manal a subscription to *Canadian Geographic* and, to the three younger girls, a subscription to *Kayak*. (Harriet loved that magazine when she was a kid!) And although the Albrdians have been spared lectures on asymmetrical federalism, I have shared my new interest in the history of Canadian symbols, for example, the flag, the national anthem, the beaver, hockey, and Tim Horton's. (Qassim and Manal are not so sure about the dou-

ble-double. "Too sweet," they say.) When Gord Downie died they wanted to know who he was and why their teary-eyed English teacher had made a point of announcing it in class. "Why all Canada so sad?" Manal asked. I struggled to explain who he was and why his music touched so many people, but how does anyone translate "Fifty-Mission Cap" or "Three Pistols"? Eventually I gave up and played "Bobcaygeon." To everyone's laughter, Qassim and I even danced! That night Alaa, the oldest girl, decided to do her grade 7 social studies project on The Tragically Hip.

Qassim and Manal have made an important decision. Many of their friends, in search of a larger labour market, have moved to Montreal, Toronto, and Ottawa. One family went to Edmonton. The Albrdians even took a short trip to Toronto last summer and were impressed by its tall buildings and its economic opportunities. Qassim has a brother in Toronto (as well as in Germany, Sweden, the United States, Turkey, and Jordan) and the kids miss their cousins. But Qassim and Manal have decided – Manal especially – to stay in Fredericton: it is clean, quiet, and, above everything else, safe. After the tragedy in Quebec City, the Fredericton police visited the local mosque – a former Anglican church – to explain that, while they didn't foresee anything like that happening in Fredericton, they would drive by the mosque more often in the coming days. "Incredible," said Qassim. "Incredible. In Syria, the police come, you disappear. In Canada, the police come, you get help. Incredible."

How has my friendship with the Albrdians changed me? It's like asking me why I love my daughters. I just do and it just has. Certainly, I have become much more interested in Canada's refugee history and have incorporated it into my lectures. (Parenthetically, I recommend Marlene Epp's fab CHA booklet on the history of refugees in Canada.) But I have also begun to re-think Canada. It isn't only a project of liberal rule and white settler nationalism. It's also a project in diversity and multiculturalism, making it a pretty decent place. In short, multiculturalism works: when individuals feel secure and confident in their ethnic, religious, and linguistic identities they are more willing to accept the ethnic, religious, and linguistic identities of others. At least, that is the promise. True, it can be official and facile self-congratulations, but, according to Maurice Careless, multiculturalism is very Canadian, its roots lying in the historical imperative to accommodate the French language and the Catholic faith.

At the Canada 150 celebration in downtown Fredericton, the happiest guy in the crowd was a Syrian refugee named Eid. He and his wife and their two boys had been in Canada for just a few months and their English was still very weak, just a handful of words really. Greeting me with a bear hug, he said "I love Canada," over and over again. "I love Canada. I love Canada." In that moment, at the intersection of Queen and Regent, so did I.

*Donald Wright, University of New Brunswick*