

Serving Special Populations and Making a Difference: Refugees



THIS column is a bit of an indulgence since it sits at the overlapping personal interests of my life—libraries, charity, and a passion for making a difference. But then, I know this mix is pretty typical of our profession.

Some background: In Canada we committed to take in more than 25,000 refugees in just a few short months at the end of 2015 and early 2016. Most of these refugees are families who have been living (with millions of others) for years in camps or desperately engaging in perilous sea travel. Too many have perished in this way, and your heart cannot help but break just by seeing the news photos.

So what is to be done? As an individual, you're overwhelmed by the enormity of it all. How can I possibly make a difference? What can I personally do?

My wife's neighborhood book club had just such a conversation. One of the women in the group had sponsored a family coming to Canada during the refugee crisis

in Rwanda. They determined to sponsor one individual, but he arrived at the airport with eight orphans in tow whom he couldn't leave behind. So, what the heck! They took them all on. This was decades ago and that "family" has successfully integrated into our society and contributes gratefully to Canada. It's one of the success stories that inspired our group. We immediately determined that research was needed and set the goal to sponsor a family in the group sponsorship class. (The Canadian government directly sponsors thousands of refugees as part of our international commitments. In Canada, you can also sponsor refugees as an individual or a group or in the family class.)

So, our ragged troupe set out to figure all this out. Now 4–5 months later, we're all set to accept our family. We needed to raise \$40,000 to cover the costs in Toronto for 1 year, find housing, household goods, and much more. We've all been through our required police checks and taken the required church- or government-sponsored

refugee training. By the time this article comes out, we hope to have met our family (one of 25,000-plus this year alone)!

This was the easy part. We made personal financial commitments, ran fundraisers, and sold friends and colleagues on donating. That was also easy—Canadian culture is pluralistic, multicultural, and, frankly, we're all migrants at some point in our past. That's what makes nations strong.

Now on to the tough stuff . . . ensuring the success of "our" family while respecting their dignity, culture, and needs. It takes a village to raise a child. And that global village is what we're joining.

LIBRARY STORIES

There are library stories here. A lot of them. And that is the point of this column.

At this juncture, since we haven't met our family yet, we don't know if they're a nuclear family. We don't know if a family member was killed in the war, how many kids there are and what ages they are, the language they speak, educational needs or grade levels, occupations, or anything, really. However, we can plan ahead.

We're doing that librarian thing! It's just a simple mind-mapping exercise. We're identifying and drawing on the expertise of those who've been involved with several waves of immigrants and refugees. We are making lists! We're building a network of like-minded groups. We are collecting websites of advice as well as social service agencies, language help for learning or translation, medical specialties, and so much more. We can't be 100% prepared but—like any good librarian—we now know where to look.

The media and librarian types among us built a website and social media channels (RoncyRefugeeRelief.org). We're connected to the special programs offered for refugees by the Toronto Public Library.

the pipeline

We're in touch with the refugee specialists at the Toronto District School Board. We know where the settlement houses are, and we're getting onside with the philosophy of welcoming new Canadians while allowing them to make decision on their own with support from good information and advice.

It's likely that every school and community in Toronto will host many Syrian refugee families. It's a similar situation to the influxes of Rwandan, Vietnamese, Tamil, and Somali refugees in the past. This is the sad cycle of war and evil that we seek to address. Canada celebrates its immigrant roots as well as valuing its culture of tolerance and freedom. While we may dream of a day when this process isn't necessary, until then, we can make a difference one family at a time.

THINGS YOU CAN DO AS A LIBRARIAN

So, as our libraries—public and school and higher-ed—prepare for this latest influx of refugees, we have brainstormed what we can do to help. Also, all of this is in the context of cultural sensitivity training and giving “voice” to these new Canadians. We will try to go beyond the basics. We can't take our new Canadians and push them into the deep end of the pool. These people

have already proved their resilience by surviving. After meeting their housing, medical, security, education, and food needs, we will go the extra mile. Our family will have a laptop with internet connectivity (and training if desired) to connect with information and the world at large as well as distant family and friends through Skype and email. A TV will be there too. And you can't easily survive in today's world without a smartphone (instead of a landline). Setting a family up for success is the goal. Here are some of the services we will access through social service agencies, schools, and libraries:

Assessment and Registration

We will assist in the initial school registration process, assess the needs of students and their family, and develop an appropriate action plan in coordination with the school.

Practical Guidance

Throughout the school year, we will provide information sessions and guidance for students and their families.

Culturally Sensitive Counseling

We will provide nontherapeutic and culturally

sensitive counseling to address any immediate needs and to facilitate adaptation to school and community. Together, we will explore different options for their unique situation and commit to ongoing support as needed.

Supported Referrals and Casework

We will be able to assist with immediate intervention services in crisis situations, referring to programs and community resources. This includes joint case management with professionals as required. Services may be long-term for complex cases.

Home Visits and Outreach

We will arrange home visits if this is more convenient or comfortable for the client. We will monitor progress through regular contact.

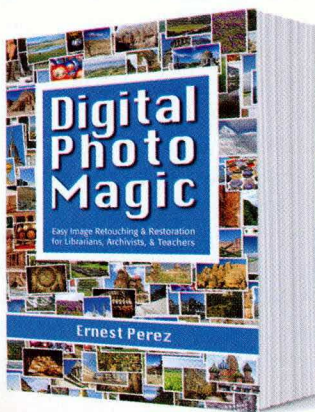
Cultural Understanding and Linguistic Interpretation

Note that interpretation may require a few days' notice to coordinate.

Advocacy

As a support to students' families, we will advocate on their behalf as required and necessary.

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“AT THIS JUNCTURE, SINCE WE HAVEN’T MET OUR FAMILY YET, WE DON’T KNOW IF THEY’RE A NUCLEAR FAMILY. WE DON’T KNOW IF A FAMILY MEMBER WAS KILLED IN THE WAR, HOW MANY KIDS THERE ARE AND WHAT AGES THEY ARE, THE LANGUAGE THEY SPEAK, EDUCATIONAL NEEDS OR GRADE LEVELS, OCCUPATIONS, OR ANYTHING, REALLY. HOWEVER, WE CAN PLAN AHEAD.”

Resources and Access

We will take all family members to their local library (Toronto is rich in these with more than 100 branches soon) and get them signed up for library cards and memberships. And we will make sure they know about all the services and information available through the library—internet access, multilingual collections, ESL programming, aid from settlement workers and social workers, and more.

With our SSIL (social science instructional lab) presence at the library, we will provide support, information, referral, and

guidance to newcomers on topics such as these:

- ESL
- Interpretation and translation
- Schooling for your children
- Healthcare
- Employment and housing
- Community services and programs
- Immigration issues
- Canadian citizenship

Doesn’t everything look just like a reference question or research project? I know school libraries can brainstorm more activities to work on an individual basis—just as we customize programming for new stu-

dents from anywhere and make a difference in their integration into the school and society at large.

This is an amazing opportunity. Earlier I asked that, when overwhelmed by the enormity of it all, how can I possibly make a difference? What can I personally do? It’s clear, this is the power of one in which we’re now part of hundreds of sponsorship groups that are making a difference in thousands of refugees coming to our country. We can’t fix everything—but we can make a start! ■

Contact Stephen at stephen.abram@gmail.com.

SELECTED RESOURCES

These are a selection of a few text resources oru grop found useful.

IFLA Public Libraries Section: “Responding—Public Libraries and Refugees”

www.ifla.org/node/9925

CILIP: “Welcoming Refugees to the UK (And to Libraries): The Role of Libraries in Times of Crisis”

cilip.org.uk/blog/welcoming-refugees-uk-libraries

European Commission: Selected Publications on Refugees’ and Migrants’ Integration in Schools

http://ec.europa.eu/libraries/doc/refugees_and_migrants_integration_in_shcool.pdf

iColorin Colorado: The Refugee Experience: Books for Children
colorincolorado.org/booklist/refugee-experience-books-children

Refuge Magazine: “Refugee Students in Toronto Schools”

refuge.journals.yorku.ca/index.php/refuge/article/view/21886

Libraries Without Borders: The IDEAS BOX, a Portable Multi-media Kit for Refugee and Vulnerable Populations

librarieswithoutborders.org/index.php/news-and-events/lwb-news/item/291-the-ideas-box-a-portable-multi-media-kit-for-emergency-humanitarian-situations

Harvard Library: Research Guides: Immigration Refugee and Advocacy

guides.library.harvard.edu/immiglawadvocacy

School Library Journal: “Syrian Refugees Welcomed to Canada With an SLJ Best Book”

slj.com/2015/12/public-libraries/syrian-refugees-welcomed-to-canada-with-an-slj-best-book/

Central Alberta Refugee Effort (CARE): Settlement Support in Schools & Libraries—SSISL

immigrant-centre.ca/our-services/settlement-support-in-schools-libraries-ssisl

NYPL: “Understanding the Syrian Refugee Crisis”

nypl.org/blog/2015/10/02/understanding-syrian-refugee-crisis

Outreach Librarian: “Outreach to Overlooked Populations: Refugees”

theoutreachlibrarian.com/2013/08/15/outreach-to-overlooked-populations-refugees

Library Journal: “Public Libraries Support Refugees”

<http://lj.libraryjournal.com/2015/12/public-services/public-libraries-support-refugees/>

ABD Magazine: “Libraries for Refugee Camps—The Shanti Volunteer Association”

accu.or.jp/appreb/report/abd/33-1/abd3313.html

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