

Refugee committee makes a commitment

By Tony Pearson

Last February, a group meeting at St. Paul's United Church began looking into the process of refugee sponsorship. Last week, they started the official process of applying to bring a family to Canada. But already, they know the five-member family they will sponsor. Amir Jarad, 32 years old, and his wife Mariam, 25, have three children: daughter Sara, 6, son Nawar, 4, and new-born daughter Farah.

The connection was made through Amir's sister Amira, who had already made it to Canada and now lives in Oakville. Amira provided a harrowing description of the Jarad family's ordeals, starting from the time their Damascus suburb was bombed three years ago by the Assad government's forces; this destroyed their home as well as Amir's workplace. The family then moved in with his parents, a situation which lasted until the Syrian army invaded this home and arrested his brother for reasons they never disclosed. After three days of severe torture (including broken vertebrae in his neck), he was released. That convinced Amir to take the family to Turkey.

They escaped with just enough money to get a tiny slum apartment. The older children do go to school, but are bullied, as the local Turks look down on Syrian refugees. Amir has occasionally secured work, at a rate one quarter that of other employees ? but then he wasn't paid at all.

The injured brother and his family were sponsored by Ryerson University, and he will shortly be able to receive the medical attention necessary to deal with the results of his torture.

Amira described the family situation: ?He does not believe that his children could ever have a future in Turkey; Syrians in Turkey have very few rights. The family can only afford to eat canned or dried goods. Their living conditions are only getting worse and worse, the longer they live there.?

At this stage, Amir felt he would have to risk a boat trip across the Aegean Sea to get into Europe. This is the route that has taken so many refugee lives. However, his sister told him that she would try to secure a Canadian immigration sponsor. ?I promised to do my best to help them come to Canada and begin a brand new life. I have convinced them to wait for me to find them some help but I do not know how much longer they will wait.?

On hearing this, the Bancroft committee, entitled Social Justice Without Borders, told their Oakville contact to file notice of intention with the United Church of Canada. Because the process has now slowed down after the initial 25,000 Syrians were brought over, it will take at least a year and probably 18 months before the family can come. There's also a ton of paperwork, and a lot of fundraising to do. The committee has pledged itself to raise as much for local poverty relief as for refugee assistance.

At this stage, the committee does not know where the family will go once they arrive in Canada; it could be Peterborough or Belleville, not necessarily Bancroft itself.

The fundraising and public awareness campaign will kick off with a screening at the end of June of *This Changes Everything*, the documentary based on Naomi Klein's book about how to fight climate change and economic injustice.