

Celebration marks refugee family's first year as new Canadians

By Marni Walsh

About 50 people attended the Headwaters Refugee Sponsorship Committee's celebration for the Al Haj Ali family recently at Westminster United Church in Orangeville.

It was in December 2015 that the family arrived in Canada to make Orangeville their new home.

The Al Haj Ali family are among the more than 25,000 new Canadians who began landing at Pearson airport at the time. They were welcomed with gifts of warm coats by Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and Ontario Premier Kathleen Wynne, representing the love and good will of the nation.

Months before, Dufferin neighbours and area church groups banded together to sponsor the refugee families, mobilize the community and set up resources. This included The Headwaters' Sponsorship Group and Westminster Church in Orangeville. Canadians across the country spent the last year showing these new Canadians, and the world, our best side – our humanity as a nation of peacekeepers.

"This is who we are," Wynne told reporters last December.

The Al Haj Ali family "has done extremely well," said lead sponsor Brian Logel. "Emad has been employed full-time for three months now, so his health benefits will soon kick in. One year later, the family is financially independent."

Emad has his driver's licence and wife Razan has her beginner's licence and is taking driving lessons. Both continue to work on improving their English. Razan did very well in her English as a Second Language (ESL) courses during the summer, continued with correspondence in the fall, and is now in ESL in Brampton. She is in the process of finding out what re-qualifying as a Canadian nurse will entail for her.

Eight-year-old Hamoudi and nine-year-old Fatima are both doing well at school and enjoyed soccer, baseball and swimming this past summer. Logel said little Sara, who was born at Headwaters Health Care Centre in the spring is "a very friendly, happy and healthy baby."

The anxiously anticipated arrival of Emad's brother under the sponsorship of Project Save Haven has been cause for celebration. Awad and Asma Al Haj Ali finally arrived with their four children, Adnan, 10, Obadah, 8, Obaydah, 6, and Abeer, 3, earlier in the year.

In reflection on the year's experience, Logel said he thought private sponsorship is the best means to successful resettlement. He said government-sponsored families in the area are struggling more without the support of a local team. Sponsors like the Headwaters group guide their families financially and socially, helping them to navigate the many challenges of living in a new country. Logel credited the Liberals for sponsoring families, but said the government does not have the manpower to help the families on a day-to-day basis.

"We feel our families will integrate faster and become independent faster," he said, noting that ESL training is the key to integration. Unfortunately, services are not available in small centres like Orangeville and Shelburne. Sponsors, along with community service groups, have had to organize to transport families to Brampton, where a wide variety of immersion courses at individual levels are running every day.

On the behalf of local sponsor groups, Logel said the community is to be "commended for welcoming and supporting the new families with donations of money, items and their time."

He reported that in celebration of their first anniversary in Orangeville, Razan Al Haj Ali composed and delivered a thank-you speech for the Westminster gathering "in excellent English" and presented the Westminster Church community with an Arabic blessing and thank-you plaque.