

Eritrean refugee family has finally come to a new home

By Constance Scrafield

Refugees arrive to safety and from dangers in many ways, very few of which are easy.

A married couple landed at Pearson Airport and were brought to Orangeville recently after a gruelling five years of waiting in Khartoum, Sudan after fleeing their homes in Eritrea.

While, for the past several years, the focus of the world has been on Syria, it is painful and hard to remember that there is similar suffering in many other countries and regions in the world. Eritrea, a small country on the northeast coast of Africa, has been named by the United Nations as having the worst human rights record in the world ? which is saying a great deal. In addition, the country has been in conflict with neighbouring Ethiopia for years, which always causes chaos and losses for all concerned.

So, it was a real thrill to be on the spot, at the home of the Burnside family on Mono's Second Line, to welcome Yohana and Tuem Teweld coming from Eritrea ? at last.

Years ago, Kiflom Wehleab, once he escaped from Eritrea, came to Canada and, having earned his engineering degree, worked for R. J. Burnside and Associates Limited in Orangeville and got to know the Burnside family. At one point, he went back to the Middle East to meet his wife-to-be, was kidnapped in Yemen, ransomed, got married in Bahrain and returned to Canada with his new wife, all with the help of the Burnsides.

Then began the process of getting his brother Mesfin out of Eritrea. He, with his wife Fesseha, had managed to escape and to live through five years in Yemen, waiting and worrying for their papers to clear them to come here.

They made it, and Mesfin now cleans windows for a living and Fesseha does some cleaning, but they have three growing girls and a new baby.

?You wouldn't believe how hard they work,? said Bob Burnside.

Fesseha's brother Tuem and his wife Yohana arrived after another five-year ordeal of paper work that finally came to a happy conclusion.

Mr. Burnside wanted everyone to know that Dufferin-Caledon MP David Tilson was very helpful in the concluding of this exercise. ?... and Sandra, who works in the office, was really helpful about keeping us informed and re-assuring us that things were in the works,? he said. ?Although ? can you believe it ? at one time, they (Canadian officials) actually lost the file!?

Once the process with the Canadian government was in hand, Tuem and Yohana got married and became another part of the process.

The two of them made their perilous way out of Eritrea into Sudan (?Imagine, if you're fleeing to Sudan, how bad things must be,? Mr. Burnside commented).

However, although they arrived to a UN ?camp? in Sudan, they didn't stay there. Tuem and Yohana made their way to Khartoum, where they could keep in touch with the people here. As well, Tuem could work as a barber for a little money to feed themselves. Lessons in being a refugee: if your medical papers go to Egypt for processing, it can take two years; but if the papers go to Italy, where they care for matters more seriously, it may only take four months.

All this generosity for this family has been extended privately by Bob and Nancy Burnside and Sharon and Holger Larsen.

?It started with Mesfin's brother,? Mr. Burnside said. ?When you get to know people and have some involvement in their lives ? one by one. It means so much to Fesseha to have her brother here.?

?We saw there was a need and they are our friends,? Mr. Larsen added. ?So, we just wanted to help.?

It was a beautiful spring late afternoon. There was the chatter of children being given their dinner in the kitchen.

Yohana and Tuem sat on the couch with his sister, Fesseha, so happy and, quite admittedly, somewhat overwhelmed with the years of waiting and then suddenly, flying out of Khartoum to Cairo, to take the long flight to Pearson Airport: coming, in fact, out of the desert to this green and pleasant land. Now, they will live in Shelburne with Mesfin and Fesseha and begin their new lives.

Goodness knows when they last slept quietly and without fear.

This is what it is all about: this freedom to sleep without fear. No wonder they are anxious to work hard and do well.

Asked what he hoped for here, Tuem told his sister and she translated: ?To learn English and to work.?