



April 22, 2017 by: Shane Judge

Message from the Chair of the Interchurch Refugee Committee

The First 48 Hours

Saeid Arroub says he remembers nothing of arriving in Thunder Bay on a cold, rainy afternoon. He'd been awake for more than a day, including 13 hours of flying from Beirut to Cairo to Toronto and Thunder Bay in one go. The kids and Saeid's wife Hikmat fared better. They'd obviously had some sleep on the flights.

Courtesy of a van supplied by Pinewood Ford, I-CRC volunteer John Stewart quickly got the family from the airport to the Strathcona Motel. The hotel's owners are providing the room at no charge while we search for permanent accommodations.

The motel room seemed very small for six people. It was made smaller by an abundance of food delivered by Sandra Snider and her team from Family Life. But it turns out the family had survived for four years in much smaller, damper conditions. They'd been living in the basement of an apartment building in a room about 400 square feet in size. They'd paid \$400 US a month for the privilege.

Driving separately to the motel, I realized the route along the Thunder Bay Expressway to Hodder Avenue was mostly cut through a forest. I can only imagine what the family thought: we're in the woods now!

The arrival team quickly settled the family into their temporary home with the help of Maha, the translator from the Thunder Bay Multicultural Association.

Saeid says he hadn't eaten the entire time he traveled, so he had some of the fruit Sandy had left and then fell asleep hard.

Friday was a much better day all round. The sun was shining, everyone had slept and eaten and by the time the Arrival Team returned at 2 p.m. the family was eager to see the city. We drove along Black Bay Road to the road along the south shore of Boulevard Lake. The family was thrilled to see the Current River from the Black Bay bridge. So much water!

Our first stop was the Multicultural Association offices on Court Street. We told the family this place would be one of the most important buildings in their lives over the next year. We sat for half an hour with our settlement officer who gently introduced them to the settlement process, the paperwork they would face and the English language training that would be available. We'll be back there Tuesday to go through the formal paperwork required by the federal government. But it won't be nearly as intimidating a process now.

Next, we walked down Cook Street to Damascus Donair on Saint Paul Street. We introduced ourselves. Our family met one of the owners, another Syrian refugee, and began to get an idea they were not alone in Thunder Bay.

Next it was to Hillcrest Park to get the big picture of where they lived. That's a lot of water out there! The kids did what kids do. They immediately got off the pavement of the parking lot and onto the grassy slopes. They ran around and around, revelling in the freedom to move. Khaled, the youngest, went full tilt down the hill after seeing some other kids roll on the ground down the slope to the bottom. They also discovered some playground equipment and climbing rocks. Energy to burn. After about 40 minutes it was back in the trucks and down to Marina Park. We could barely keep Khaled from the water. He was enthralled. The girls loved the ice that remained among the boat slips, something they'd never seen



Photo by Lynda Jarrett-Stewart

before. All four climbed up on a remnant pile of snow left over from parking lot snow clearing. Snowballs flew! Much smiling.

A highlight for Khaled turned out to be the skate park. He's a daredevil. John Stewart convinced one of the kids to surrender his board so Khaled could give it a go. John and I each took a hand. I think the little

guy's hooked. Mom and dad must have been pleased to see all the kids laughing and playing and enjoying the view of the Sleeping Giant. We introduced them all to random groups of people walking through the park. Everyone, and I mean everyone, had a big smile for them, shook hands and welcomed them to Thunder Bay. It was a wonderful experience for everyone to see Thunder Bay at its friendliest.

By now it was 4:50. Everyone back in the trucks. It was off to Kabab Village for a marvelous dinner of middle eastern foods. The family all tucked in, especially the girls, Fatima, Ritaj, and Hannan.

We were joined by Larry Chlebovec, our liaison with the federal government (he works for the Catholic Archdiocese with the fancy title "Sponsorship Agreement Holder" and Imad Queer, our bon vivant translator and raconteur.

Dinner lasted two and a half hours. Carol, Liisa, Cynthia, Christine and Alison of the I-CRC joined the group. The young girls sat amongst them. By 7:30 the kids were pooped and full of sleep-inducing food. Having had our free Lebanese coffees and delicious backlava desserts courtesy of the restaurant, we headed back to

Current River. Larry and Imad went back with us. Larry wanted to make sure all the paperwork was in order before Tuesday's meeting with the settlement officer at the Multicultural Association and the conference call with ImmigrationCanada. As I left, I waved to them all and said "bye". The kids smiled. Hikmat and Saeid placed their hands over their hearts and tapped them gently. Nothing more needed to be said.



Photo by Lynda Jarrett-Stewart