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“Refugees Find Support and Friendship”

A conversation with Mary Burns, Refugee Outreach Committee, St. Joseph's Parish, Highland Creek, Ontario

CANADA

It's the last Saturday of the month in St. Joseph's Parish.

Downstairs all is alive — the corridor fills up as people make their requests for food or clothing, the main room echoes to the sound of children as they sit and play and interact. A puzzle, a circle game, crayons and paper overcome language isolation.

Moving quietly among them is Mary Burns, coordinator of the St. Joseph's refugee programme. They know her well and she knows them. She makes sure they are being attended to, calls them by name and inquires how things have gone this past month.

She gets to know what's going on in their lives,

The refugee committee in St. Joseph's has grown from six to eleven members this year. That enables Mary to spend more time with her people. Some of the families have moved from the shelter on Kingston Road to their first apartment, but they return each month. Here they belong. Here they feel welcome.

“I hear from them often, not just when they have a problem, but on a ‘Hi, how are you?’ basis,” says Mary. “They phone when they haven't got the right guidance, the right support, or the right information.”

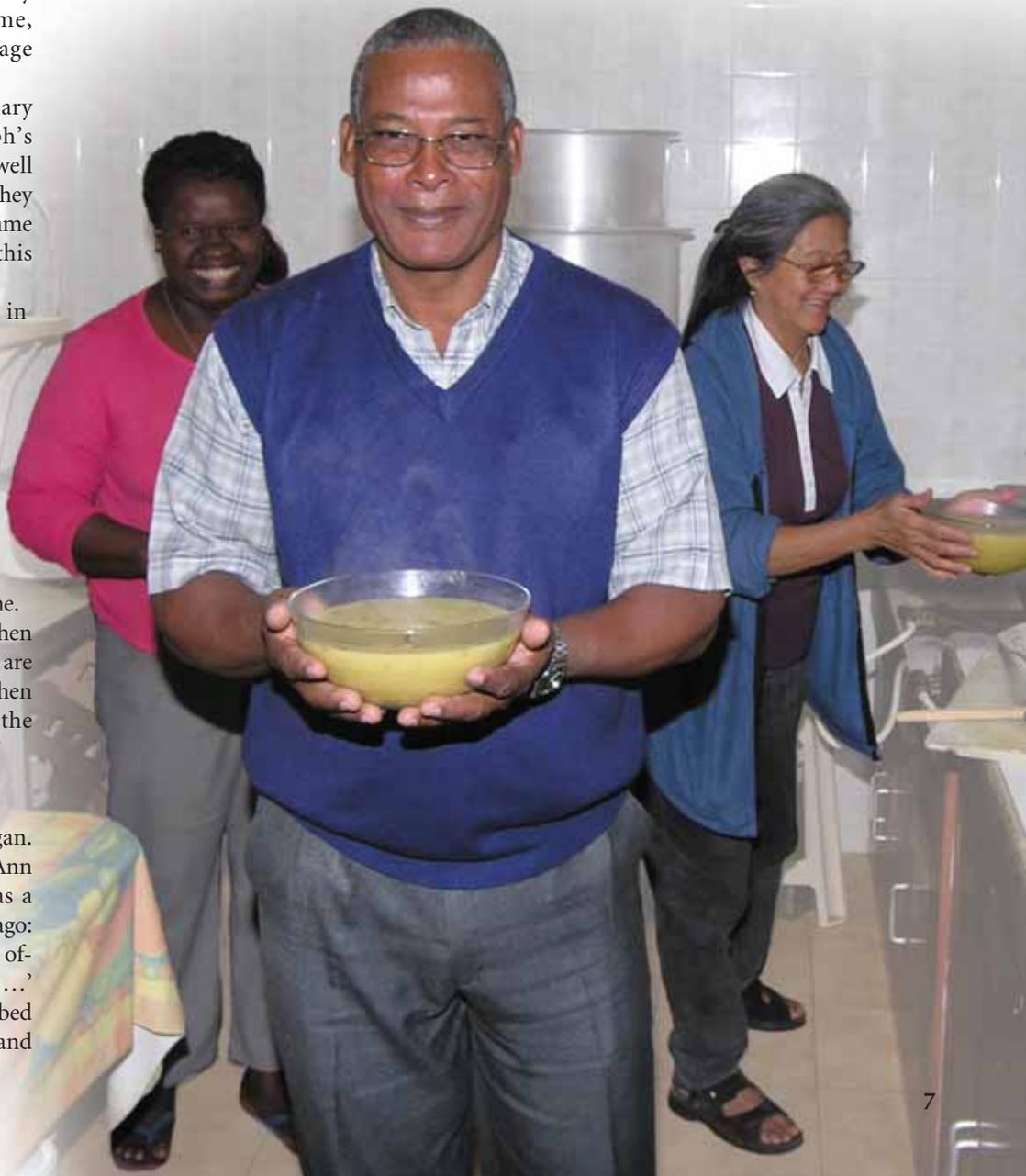
How it started

Mary looks back to when it all began. “My love for refugees started when Sr. Ann Lemire, my first principal when I was a teacher, phoned me about twelve years ago: ‘Mary, a young boy has come into the office from Somalia. He's all by himself ...’ That night my son Michael moved his bed over, the newcomer brought his bed and

put it beside Michael's — an arrangement that lasted for two and a half years. He had no English. He put ketchup all over everything. He was fifteen, had never used a knife or fork and had come from a refugee camp. He had no one in Toronto. After

some time his sister came and finally his mother and five other children. He never could adjust to Toronto winters. So he went to Tennessee about ten years ago where he met a girl from the same village in Somalia. We still hear from him.”

Photo by Lucien Heitz, Pentecôte sur le monde



The last Saturday of the month

In St. Joseph's basement the refugees have gathered for support and friendship. They have become friends. They meet other people from their part of the world speaking the same language. They help each other. Mary explains, "They come for food, because they're hungry. Last month a lady was jamming sandwiches to take home. I don't think they eat breakfast. You can tell they're hungry by the way they eat. We provide them with food depending on the size of the family — at least enough for maybe a

refugee shelters with pamphlets showing where they are and what services they provide. The numbers have risen dramatically from eight at the beginning to forty-eight families this spring.

At the beginning it was difficult to get them to come to the church. So the committee members would fill a car with food and clothing and go to the shelter — "a heck of a lot of work" Mary remembers. They begged Fr. Peter Fleming, pastor of St. Joseph's, for a room in the basement. "We had no idea whether it was going to

"We could advise them about getting an apartment. I can understand that when they have just come to a new country they're happy to get out of the shelter and into any apartment. At present they go to the cheapest one available only to find out that there are many, many problems there. Because they have signed up for a year they get stuck with so much they don't like."

The shelter

Mary pulls no punches when she describes conditions at the refugee shelter — a converted motel. "Deplorable," she says. "They are accustomed to hardship, but when they go into the apartments there are dangers for their children. They have about five bolts on their door — a door they are afraid to open. The refugees don't tell you the whole story until they leave. It's OK by day, but at night it's horrible: fights, drug dealers, prostitutes. Yet as far as the owner is concerned it's perfect place to come to.

"It's dirty. We went there one day and they were spraying rodents and bed bugs. The fumes were terrible — all the children breathing in those unhealthy fumes! We actually choked. The owner would never tell you that. The city pays him for the rooms and only checks once or twice a year. You can hardly breathe there in the summer. As far as furniture is concerned — the refugees have mattresses, but no chairs, no TV. They have to walk to the courtyard to prepare their food — two stoves between twenty-four families." Her verdict? "You know what? We can do better than that."

Mary describes what helping refugees has meant to her. "When you go to them and meet them you build a trust between you and them. For me it's been a wonderful experience. They are just so beautiful and so warm, willing to accept support and help. They are very open. Wonderful people. Wonderful people." ■

*Many have remarked how different we are —
we don't judge, we give what they need.
It's here — we've got it — take it."*

week. After they've paid their rent they have very little left over. Towards the end of the month some of them have nothing."

St. Joseph's is not the only refugee agency in Scarborough, but it is different. "At St. Joseph's we ask no questions," said Mary. "Elsewhere they have to show their ID, how much money they make, how much they pay in rent. Many have remarked how different we are — we don't judge, we give what they need. It's here — we've got it — take it."

Parishioners, families and friends donate the food and clothing distributed on the last Saturday of the month. The word is out that those who come at the beginning of the morning get the best choice. The mothers want their children to have the best they can have. "I'd be the same way," said Mary, "My mother used to say, 'the first one out the door is the best dressed.' I look at these mothers — they know what they need and what they want. Good for them."

The rest of the month

In between the last Saturdays Mary gets phone calls: "Could you get me a job?" She looks through the Scarborough Mirror regularly to see what is on offer. Sometimes they ask her if they can put her name down as a reference. That helps. They have few friends, nobody to speak English for them so they need an English speaker to say, "These are wonderful people; if you hire them you will be pleased."

During the week prior to the last Saturday members of the committee go to the

fly or not," says Mary. But before long they needed a cloakroom to store the food and clothing. And this summer, Fr. David Okenyi, the current Spiritan pastor, gave them another room and storage space for extra food and clothing. Which brings up a project dear to Mary's heart.

"If only we had a Centre!"

"When you work for these people you want something better for them," sighs Mary. "If we had a Centre it would be so much easier to open it each day. There are enough people in St. Joseph's who would take turns being there. I've often said that a centre would give refugees the information they need, the support they need, a place to just come and talk, a place that could provide so many who have nothing with what they need when they leave their shelter: beds, dishes — just the basics. If only we had a central place where they could come and pick up a few things just to get them started on their own.

Kofi Annan (former Secretary-General of the UN)

Immigrants and refugees should not — and must not — be seen as a burden. Those who risk their lives and those of their families are often those with the greatest ambition to make a better life for themselves, and they are willing to work for it. They do not leave their familiar surroundings, their cultures, or their families for a life of dependence, crime or discrimination thousands of kilometers away. They merely want a safer, more prosperous future for their children. If they are given a chance to make the most of their abilities, on an equal basis, the vast majority of them will be assets to society.