

News of a Roxham Road refugee

Frances Ravensbergen

Since 2017, Roxham Road near Hemmingford has been an important unofficial border crossing for asylum seekers (also called refugees) who enter Canada irregularly from the United States. Media attention has focused largely on numbers and politics, but stories about what actually happens to the individuals are rare.

Bridges not Borders, a Hemmingford volunteer group that has helped many refugees cross the border at Roxham, has received updates from some of those individuals. A young Sudanese woman who crossed in early 2018 has a story that reflects the experience of many.

Ella (not her real name) was an active, hardworking student in Sudan; she was involved in environmental issues, student organizations, and volunteer flood-relief work. In 2016, she was offered an academic fellowship in the United States, which she accepted.

Towards the end of her U.S. studies, the political and social situation in Sudan was becoming increasingly difficult; inflation was at 300 per cent, and the government was arresting and imprisoning many of Ella's former coworkers and friends. One of her friends was arrested and then disappeared.

Ella organized protests from the

U.S., joining with others in Sudan to speak up about the brutality of the Sudanese government; however, she realized this activism meant her life would be in danger if she returned home. When her fellowship ended, although she applied for asylum in the U.S., she had no work permit and precarious housing. She also had health issues, but no money to see a doctor for tests and treatments.

Her husband, who had stayed in Sudan, joined her on a visitor's visa. Both young people worried about increasing hostility towards minorities under the Trump presidency. In late 2017, Ella, who wore a hijab, was attacked.

Ella's Sudanese passport had expired, and she could only renew it by going back to Sudan or waiting until the Sudanese government sent a delegation to the U.S. to renew passports, which happens every 5 years. But the couple decided they could no longer stay in the U.S. Based on information on the internet, they decided to go to Canada via Roxham Road.

The bus ride from Philadelphia to Plattsburgh was one of the hardest times of Ella's life. She was in constant fear of being stopped by U.S. immigration officers or the border patrol, even though the couple had papers stating they were in the U.S. legally. She was also very afraid of the many unknowns that lay ahead.

The couple took a taxi to Roxham Road in the middle of the night.

They knew they would be arrested upon entering Canada, and although they found it intimidating to be faced by four RCMP officers, they were treated respectfully. They were questioned and then taken to the official border crossing at Lacolle, and while they were there, the Red Cross offered them food. Ella's health problems had been worsened by stress, and she broke out in hives; a border patrol agent sent her to the Red Cross medical tent where she saw a doctor and received medication and a referral for medical attention in Montreal. She was astonished that it cost nothing.

All their belongings were taken from them to be inspected. Later they were questioned again, and criminal checks were done. In the evening of their first day in Canada, they were put on a bus to go to the Montreal YMCA for a short-term stay while they obtained their documents and found housing.

During the stay at the YMCA, Ella and her husband received a thorough orientation to Canada and Quebec. They met other refugees with whom they remain friends. The young couple, with help from refugee organizations, found an apartment and furniture, and they both found jobs. Ella began volunteering for several organizations, including the Welcome Collective and Welcome Hall Mission. She is now working on her master's degree, and both young people been granted refugee status.

Ella worries about her family. Her father doesn't want to leave Sudan, but the situation there has become even worse with the military government and rampant COVID. Once she has her Canadian citizenship, she hopes to be able to visit. Meanwhile, she is grateful that the Roxham Road crossing was the way for her and her husband to find a new home.

Refugees cross the border "irregularly," not "illegally," because of a bilateral agreement between the U.S. and Canada called the Safe Third Country Agreement (STCA). Under it, asylum seekers must apply for refugee status in the first "safe" country they come to after fleeing their own. If that country is the U.S. and they don't want to stay, their only choice (unless they meet one of the exceptions to the STCA) is to present themselves "irregularly" at an unofficial border crossing, where they are briefly arrested. They can then apply for refugee status in Canada. The STCA agreement is currently being challenged in Canadian courts in order to allow all refugees to enter Canada from the U.S. at an official border crossing.

Bridges not Borders is a volunteer group in the Hemmingford area that, prior to the pandemic, greeted refugees on the U.S. side. The group also provides education on related issues and lobbies for the rights of refugees.

Let's Visit Our Seniors Challenge sows hope for 2021

The campaign to vaccinate seniors against COVID-19 is helping to alleviate some of the isolation felt by many of our elderly during the pandemic. The Comité de concertation des aînés du Haut-Saint-Laurent (seniors committee) is hoping to reduce loneliness further, with the launch of a special edition of the Let's Visit Our Seniors Challenge. Under the theme of "Sowing Hope," the event continues

through throughout the month of April, in collaboration with the Age-Friendly Municipalities and the Générations engagées project.

Individuals in the Haut-Saint-Laurent are encouraged to participate in this challenge by sending a small plant accompanied by a friendly card to a senior citizen. In addition, people are invited to reach out to seniors by way of a weekly conversation over

the telephone or through an online communications platform.

Throughout the month, the seniors committee will be distributing 325 plants to people of advanced age living in low-income housing and private residences. The gesture is

intended to brighten the community, inspire hope and resiliency, and break the isolation faced by seniors.

The initiative was made possible by a financial contribution from Huntingdon MNA Claire IsaBelle. (SR)



Celebrate National Volunteer Week with The Gleaner

Whether you want to say "Thank you" or "Miss you", we'll publish your message including photo or graphic on The Gleaner Facebook page and in our April 21 print edition. We'll even mail a copy to that special someone.

Options starting at \$40.

For more information, contact Lorelei by **Wednesday, April 14:** promotion@the-gleaner.com or 1-844-450-5055 (712)

THE Gleaner



MONTH OF RAM

GET **20% OFF MSRP** ENDS APRIL 30TH
2021 RAM 1500 CLASSIC

TOTAL DISCOUNTS UP TO **\$12,950**

+ UP TO **\$3000** IN LOYALTY CASH FOR SELECT OWNERS ON SELECT MODELS

C.J. Kyle Ltd. 147 Chateauguay, Huntingdon
sales | parts | service (450) 264-5321
www.cjkyle.com