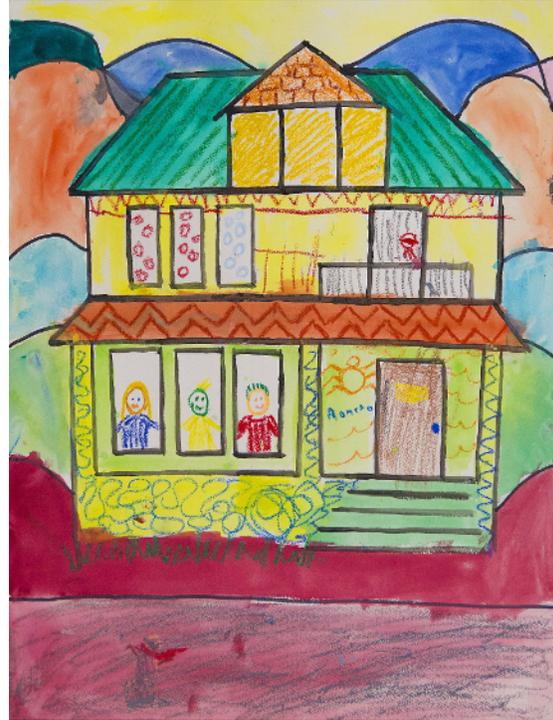


Romero House

Spring Newsletter, 2020

Living Creatively in An Uncertain Time



Cover Art by Romero House Kids

"A place becomes a home when it sustains you, when it feeds you in body as well as in spirit."

~ Robin Wall Kimmerer

Being a Community During COVID-19

Jenn McIntyre, Romero House Director

The last couple of months have been difficult for many of us. But they have also been a tremendous source of inspiration. My email inbox has been overflowing with offers of support from friends and neighbours. I am reminded every day of the endurance of community in times of hardship. It permeates walls and jumps over two meter barriers. We have had to cancel many of our upcoming celebrations, including the much-anticipated annual Wanda Road Street Party and our Lula Lounge fundraising dance. Although we may not be a community that gathers at this moment in time, we are **with** one another in a deep way.

The physical distancing measures recommended by Public Health Authorities in the midst of COVID-19 were adopted by Romero House mid-March. We are an essential service, providing housing and other critical supports to newly arrived refugee claimants who lack access to and awareness of many of the resources that exist in the best of times. This new reality has led to particular vulnerabilities for many of the families we work with. Refugee claimants have few connections in their new city, lack access to technology and may not be able to connect to resources because of language barriers or systems that are unfamiliar. With the knowledge that we are a key piece of the puzzle for these people, we have found new and creative ways to do our work. This includes remotes support consultations, delivery of weekly food hampers to nearly two dozen families and advocacy to government to ensure that refugee claimants do not fall through the cracks.

A major gift to us in this time has been the opportunity to be together with the families living in our houses. Each house, although isolated from the other three, has shared meals, birthday parties, music lessons, home improvement activities, egg hunts and more. There is an abundance of creativity in our community. We are home to talented cooks, gardeners, dancers, and visual artists. We celebrated these gifts back in January at

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An Easter piñata made by one of our neighbours!

We acknowledge our presence in this place, in Toronto, in the West Bend Neighbourhood. We acknowledge that this place, where people from all over the world meet, is on the traditional lands of the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Anishnabeg, the Chippewa, the Haudenosaunee, and the Wendat. We are grateful to our host nations. We, as Romero House, commit to learning the stories of this land, doing so in the spirit of peace, friendship, and respect.

our annual Howcroft event where we had a rich conversation about bringing more artistic imagination into our advocacy work. As you read this newsletter, you will learn how some of the Romero House residents embrace their creative impulses both in this time of isolation and in times of normalcy.

The gratitude that we have for your care and support over the years is immense. In this spirit, we humbly invite you to consider how you might continue to support the work of Romero House in this unprecedented moment. We need your help to continue to provide critical supports to refugees living at Romero House and isolated in the community. Our services have been essential in ensuring that refugee claimants have access to food, housing, immigration information, income supports and health care resources. The final pages of this newsletter offer some very practical ways that you can reach out to support Romero House.

We look forward to the day when we can see many of you again in-person, when we can dance under the stars on Wanda Road and eat delicious tacos at the Lula Lounge. Until then, take care of yourself, your loved ones, and your neighbours.

Welcomes and Farewells in Our Community



We offer gratitude to **Alexandra Jimenez** who served Romero House for 15 years as the Finance Manager and Bookkeeper. Thank you, Alexandra, for the joy and care you brought to Romero House!

We are excited to announce that **Ann Khatter**, who served this year as our Interim Bookkeeper, will be staying on in a permanent role. Welcome, Ann!



We welcome two **new babies** to the Romero House community, both with the same name! **Gabriel** was born to Sarah and Matt Klaas on December 12th, and **Allan Gabriel** was born to Allan and Marcela on April 27th.

We offer gratitude to **You Sung Chae** who served Romero House for 4 years as a Worker, and then as our Administration and Programs Assistant. You Sung completed her role at the end of March. We are grateful for You Sung's dedication and generosity!



Post- Hearing Reflections from Romero House Families

As a result of current COVID-19 restrictions, the Immigration and Refugee Board has canceled all refugee hearings until further notice. This extends the period of waiting and uncertainty for many of our residents. We celebrate that three of the families within our community received positive decisions before the restrictions were put in place. Here, they offer a few of their reflections and encouragements.

"Take courage, it is I, do not be afraid!' (Matthew 14:27): I would say that faith is what you want to believe in, but you also need to find security, serenity, tranquility and trust in justice; I am sure that this was key to facing this momentous moment in our lives. I know it is a hard process, but I remember the words of our lawyer at our last meeting before the hearing: 'You have already done your best work, I have already done my best work...Now we can only hope that the decision maker will do their best work.' And they did!"

~ **Vivian and Sergio**



"Romero House is our family here in Canada. Romero House helped us through the bureaucratic and administrative tasks and appointments. They also helped me make appointments at the United States border where I could meet my husband. And today, after a year and a half, we have been accepted as Protected Persons. We live in hope for a better future while we continue to learn English, my children are being educated, and we have jobs to look forward to. We owe this to God and Romero House and wish every refugee claimant the best in these difficult times. With love and pride!"

~ **Angela and Rodolfo**



"We are victims of armed conflict. Our futures in Colombia were uncertain, and this feeling was compounded by the unknowns of what was to come in the hearing process. In the end, the understanding that each refugee claim was subjective and had its own story to tell, helped us relax. To my fellow refugee claimants, I want to convey that you must strive for better days, that you must fight for your ideas, that your dreams are valid. But most importantly, please remember to keep your head high for you are worthy of being in this country that is brimming with opportunities."

~ **Erika and Esau**



The Gift of Food During COVID-19

In this time, food insecurity is an urgent and pressing issue. Normally, food boxes are assembled at Romero House on Thursday afternoons, and residents pick up their food at the Centre. We have shifted to delivering food boxes once a week, and have expanded the program to include current and recent residents. **We are grateful for the ongoing support of Second Harvest and Cobs Bread, and for new food donation initiatives through Kitchen 24, a collaborative space for “foodpreneurs.”** Within our own community, residents receive this food with enthusiasm and gratitude. Luis, one of our residents (pictured below), offers the following:

I have always shared my gratitude for the gifts that I have received by being on the culinary journey. For me, being a chef has been a matter of joy and achievement. To live in a world of many flavours, fragrances, tastes, and textures is a privilege. Here in Toronto, I brought my love for Colombian cuisine and then amalgamated myself with the variety of culinary culture that this city offers. As my foundation remains Colombian, I am delighted to share a traditional recipe that I grew up with, Ajiaco Sanfereno.



Ajiaco Sanfereno

*Recipe from Luis,
Romero House Resident, Bloor House*

Ingredients:

3L water
3 lb potatoes
2 lb chicken breast
Two chicken legs
Four cobs of corn
40g guascas (quickweed)
100g green onion
100g white onion
Three cloves garlic
Crema de leche (sour cream)
Capers
Salt to taste
White rice
Avocado

Procedure: In a large pot, bring the water to a boil. Finely chop the garlic and onions and add to the water, along with the salt and chicken. Peel and cut potatoes into 5mm cubes. Add the potatoes to the water, and cook for 30 minutes. Remove chicken from soup; allow to cool, then shred. Add corn and guascas. Simmer for 10 minutes.

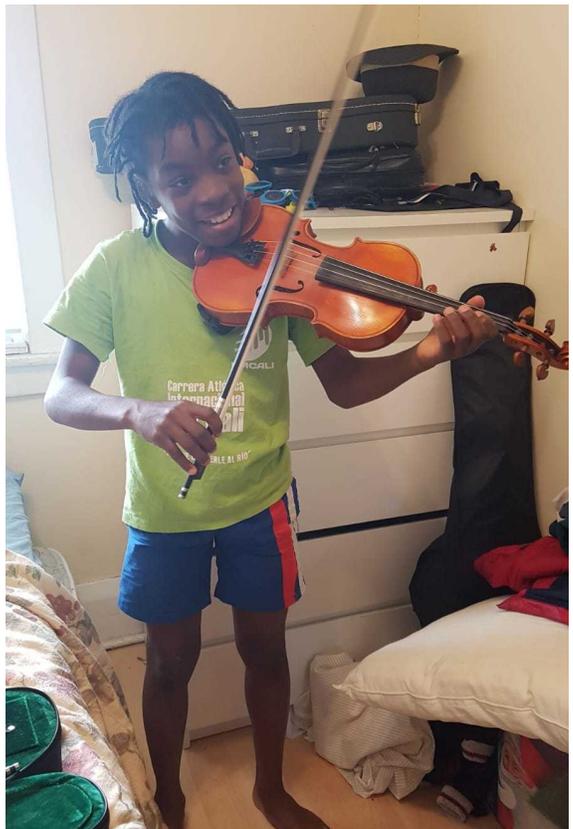
Serve in bowls with shredded chicken, crema de leche, capers, white rice, and avocado.



Physical-Distancing: A Different Type of Community

Beginning in mid-March, movement of people between the Romero houses was restricted. Physical Distancing has been challenging, but it has also given us the opportunity to practice new forms of creativity and community building within each house.

We are learning to slow down, and are enjoying the company of our housemates. In this photo spread, catch a glimpse of some of the events, activities, and projects that are happening within each house.



What are you doing these days, Kanury?
"Mostly playing violin and video games!"
~ Kanury, Resident, Keele House



Birthday parties are still possible! This one involved a Georgian Barbecue at Wanda House, a delivery to each house, and a shared meal over Zoom.



"I found an egg!" ~ Isaac (5), Dorval House



"I had a lot of fun searching for easter eggs on the rooftop. I can't wait to do it again next year!"
~ Juan (10), Bloor House



"I decided to raise Spider Man with a heart in recognition of the essential workers, to inspire hope to passerbys , and to make kids smile. Families now come around to look for him."

- **Tony Robelo, Wanda Road Neighbour**



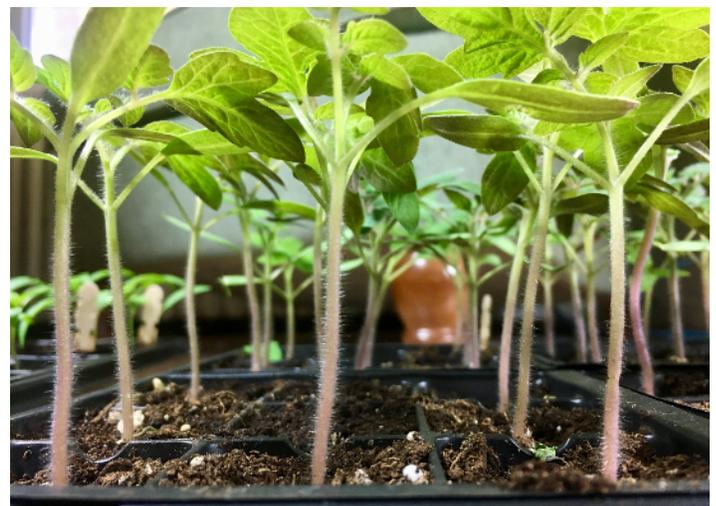
"Three days a week Vivian and Sergio have been holding Spanish lessons for the Workers at Dorval House. It's been a great way to pass the time together and to improve our Spanish!" ~ **Claire Kingston, Worker, Dorval House**



"Delivering Second Harvest brings a sense of energy and connection that has been incredibly sustaining, especially in these last few months." - **Sydney Shadbolt, Worker, Wanda House**



"I thought maybe we would be alone for Nowruz. But we celebrated with our housemates in Dorval House and it gave me energy." ~ **Aram, Resident, Dorval House**



"Watching new life emerging at a time like this gives me hope." **Anika Reynar, Worker, Dorval House**

"Look! The tomatoes are growing!" **Alan (9), Dorval House**

Celebrating the Creativity of Romero House Residents

In Defense of The Territories: Mind, Body, Home, and Planet

Henry and Claudia, Romero House Residents, Keele House

Earlier this year, we hosted the Howcroft Lecture, focusing on Arts and Activism. Paula Gomez, the co-founder of Muse Arts, was the keynote speaker for the event. As she reminded us, "Refugees are not only receivers. We are givers and creators."

Henry and Claudia performed at the Howcroft Lecture, and their dance was one of the highlights of the event. Below, Henry and Claudia speak to the ways in which their artistic practice intersects with their work as Human Rights Activists.

We are dancers and have performed globally on several platforms. Our passion for dance amalgamates the purpose to defend our ancestral territories collectively. In doing so, the space that needs liberation first is the **MIND** that must leave behind the capitalist schemes of consumerism and propaganda. We then look to defend the **BODY** that should not be seen as an instrument of war. With the mind and body nourished and safeguarded, we seek to make our **HOMES** a space that cultivates life and discards violence. Finally, our art speaks about securing our **PLANET** against the actions of those who wish for everything for themselves with cruel consequences for those who possess little capital or influence.

As a part of a collective of artists and activists from Colombia, our joint reflection on life and these changing times have encouraged us to speak our truth to the powers that be. In creating a cultural non-profit called Integral Development Corporation Social (CORIDESS), we hope to preform the uncomfortable realities of life; social, political, economical, and cultural; that have taken over our lives due to capitalist structures. Motivated by our passion for art and culture, we are committed to establishing a connecting space of various artistic

expressions to shape images that reveal different realities in our country.

In Colombia, our voices were silenced. Our struggles made us refugees. Our exile brought us to Canada, and while we remain now without political voices and capital, we live cognizant that we have not lost the power of our cultural heritage. The practice of our arts continues to call out patriarchal and capitalist practices that oppress social systems. The call of our beloved community remains strong, even as we live here. It has strengthened our resolve to expose the failures of popular power, create a more liberal society, and awaken in the conscience of people that action is the only response to continued injustice.



Celebrating the Creativity of Romero House Residents

Makeup and Confidence

Yini, Romero House Resident, Bloor House

At the beginning of March, we celebrated International Women's Day. Each one of the women in our community embodies beauty, generosity, and determination. These characteristics are expressed in different ways. Below, Yini (pictured third from the right), describes the practices that have shaped her own confidence.

I consider make-up to be an art that accentuates the facial features and gives the skin colour and life. In my opinion, it strengthens our best features, giving us confidence while highlighting our beauty. I have always believed that my natural confidence receives a lift when I have finished my makeup, making me sure of myself.

While makeup trends and techniques have changed, since ancient times, women, although beautiful in their own right and ways, have always taken the assistance of makeup to hide flaws and highlight the positive aspects of our face. From kohl in the eyes to colouring our lips, the latest trends in contouring have brought a massive change in the landscape.

From a young age, I have loved playing with makeup, hair, and associated products. I would spend hours learning how to apply makeup, the techniques that I saw others use, and how the hair could be tied in several ways. I was able to use these techniques on myself and over the years, I have gained a sense of confidence in my ability to apply makeup on myself and others.

I also believe that women must take care of their nails on the fingers and toes. My fascination with nail art and how intricate it is led me to study a course on the subject. In beautifying our hands and feet, we make them elegant.

I believe a woman adds a special sparkle to her already in-built confidence with makeup. Makeup is not necessary and not for every woman. However, we have the right to choose, thus we must exercise this right in choosing what makes us the best version of ourselves.



The Porch: Reaching Out to Our Neighbours With Music

Mary Jo Leddy, Romero House Founder, Wanda House

Romero House on Wanda Road had just about emptied out when the lockdown was declared. In anticipation of the renovations to 48 Wanda Road, we had moved out our refugee neighbours, leaving only a “skeleton” team of four people: Robbie Arzumanov, Sydney Shadbolt, You Sung Chae and myself. The house felt unusually empty, lovely but lonesome.

Then we heard that the nurses of Ontario were inviting people to show support for these frontline workers. The way of supporting was suggested as banging pots at 7:30 p.m. every night. Because we knew many of those involved in the essential services of health care, it seemed like a good thing to do. We have noted that almost 25 members of our community (neighbours, former residents etc.) are on the front lines of caring for those with Covid-19.

So we began to bang on...every night. We began to sing some old familiar tunes. In the beginning, “We all live in a yellow submarine” seemed to describe our feelings on those cold, grey days.

Then our tunes began to change. We started to look forward to the half hour on our front porch every evening. We heard other groups making themselves heard at 7:30 p.m. Some people, out for their Corona stroll, began to wave. We made a big cardboard heart, found some more instruments, discovered we had some real musical talent in our group. Never musically inclined, even I began to graduate from the Beatles to “Have you ever seen the rain”.

After six weeks of making music, we have decided to form a group and have called ourselves “The Porch”. How cool is that! Stay tuned!

There is a rhythm in the universe, composed of long and sad sounds and the lilt of joy and the heart beat of humanity. Every evening we live from this long belonging. We are here and now and from this little porch we are saying YES, we are singing YES.



The Affect of COVID-19 on the Canadian Refugee System

Anika Reynar, Romero House Worker, Dorval House

The COVID-19 Pandemic has led to significant changes in immigration processes that impact refugees in dramatic ways. Although the situation is evolving day to day, we continue to be concerned that many of these changes are exacerbating the vulnerabilities of refugee claimants. What follows is a brief summary of the impacts on refugees:

The flow of refugee claimants into Canada:

- Restrictions on air travel have almost completely stopped arrivals of non Canadian Citizens or permanent residents.
- Refugee claimants who enter Canada irregularly by land will be sent back to the United States. This may force some refugee claimants to seek other uncontrolled entry points along the border, endangering themselves and weakening public health measures. Moreover, we cannot be confident that returnees are not being detained or deported by US authorities. By exposing refugee claimants to a risk of refoulement, Canada is violating its international obligations.

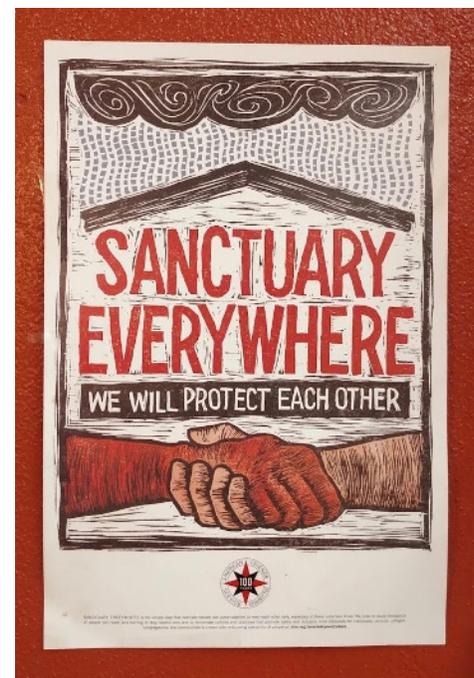
Immigration processes within Canada:

- It is still possible for someone already in the country to make a refugee claim through Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC). However, in-person interviews to complete the application process have been suspended.
- The Immigration and Refugee Board (IRB) is closed, and all hearings have been suspended.
- Many people are unable to renew their expired/expiring work permits because of lack of access to critical assistance from settlement agencies, high processing costs, and fingerprint requirements that are impossible to obtain because of the closure of Service Canada offices.

Travel restrictions mean that we are seeing very few new arrivals at Romero House. We have seen an increase in refugee claimants worried about paying rent, accessing food banks, and renewing work permits. A number of Romero House residents have had their hearings indefinitely postponed, now experiencing the anxiety of an uncertain period of waiting.

The pandemic is revealing cracks already present in these systems. Tragically, the largest COVID-19 outbreak within the Toronto Shelter system is in a refugee shelter where more than 150 people have tested positive. This points to a shelter system that is seriously under resourced.

As we work on the edge of this reality, there is a need to continually remind ourselves and the government that we do not need to choose between tackling the pandemic and upholding the rights of refugees.



How You Can Help

The COVID-19 crisis has presented new challenges for Romero House. Our spring fundraising events, the Wanda Street Party and Lula Lounge, have been canceled this year. In this time, **your financial donations are more important than ever in order to sustain our everyday operations.** Please take a moment to consider the list of needs that are included in the insert and/or attached email, and to respond as you are able.

Your generosity expresses a commitment to walking with refugees, (while maintaining physical distance). Thank you!

Financial Donations

Romero House welcomes any contribution, big or small. There are several ways you can donate:

By cheque: Make your cheque payable to Romero House and send it to the address below.

Online: You can donate by credit card through Canada Helps. Go to: www.romerohouse.org/financial-donations and click 'Donate Now'.

E-mail Money Transfer: This is possible through the major Canadian banks. They will use the same service, 'Canada Helps,' listed above.

Stocks and Securities: Romero House now accepts donations of stocks and securities. To find out more, please call our office and ask for Tembe or e-mail tembeka@romerohouse.org

Opportunities for Advocacy

Consider writing or calling your MP to make it clear that Canadians do not need to choose between tackling the pandemic and upholding the rights of refugees. A few key advocacy points are as follows:

1. Border Restrictions: We recognize the importance of controlling the possible spread of infections entering Canada. However, border restrictions on refugees place vulnerable people in dangerous situations. With good Public Health measures in place, Canada should continue to ensure that refugees can find safety within our borders.

2. Work Permits: Social-Distancing measures that shut down government offices should not prevent people from working. Many newcomers are our essential workers -- Personal Support Workers, grocery store clerks, etc. IRCC needs to automatically extend expired work permits, and to waive fingerprint requirements until Service Canada offices reopen.

3. Access to Permanent Status: The current border restrictions mean that Canada will not meet our immigration level targets this year. There are so many people already in this country who are important members of our communities. Permanent status through regularization programs should be granted to refugee claimants waiting for hearings, failed refugee claimants, Humanitarian applicants, migrant workers and other precarious migrants.

For more information on any of these points, contact Jenn McIntyre at director@romerohouse.org



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