

May 2021



ROMERO HOUSE SPRING NEWSLETTER

# 30<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY EDITION

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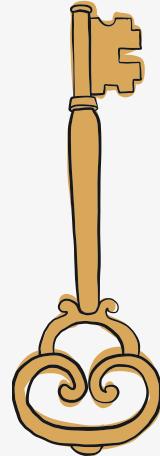
We acknowledge our presence in this place, in Toronto, in the West Bend Neighbourhood. We acknowledge that this place, where people from all over the world meet, is on the traditional lands of the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Anishnabeg, the Chippewa, the Haudenosaunee, and the Wendat. We are grateful 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.

## About the Cover:

A place where hearts and opportunities are opened.

**By Community Members Paola Gomez and Alex Usquiano**

In this digital illustration, the centre represents a community, a place we all arrive and we all are welcomed. The boxes with the keys represent each one of us, adults, children, workers, neighbours. We all come with our individual stories and experiences , and find in the centre (the community) a space, where we all are giving a key to unlock our potential. The hands with the closed lock represent the generosity of those already in the community, who welcome us and extend their hand and hearts for us to open and unlock hearts and opportunities. It is a big lock, because we all seek to reach the same... a sense of belonging and community.



## A WORD FROM THE DIRECTOR **By Jenn McIntyre**

Greetings to you all on the dawn of Romero House's 30th anniversary. A pandemic is an unusual time to celebrate this milestone, as normally we would gather together for a retreat and a great dance party at the Lula Lounge. But nonetheless, we celebrate. And we do so with great gratitude for three decades of an imperfect but committed community, where we have learned a whole lot about what it means to be good neighbours.

The moment that we are in now is a significant one on the timeline of Romero House's life. Never before have the residents and workers spent so much time together inside our houses. We have had to change everything about the way that we operate in our office to safely reach isolated refugee claimants in their homes and in shelters. And we have had to reimagine what hospitality looks like when we can't offer a welcoming cup of tea or share a common meal.

What a time to be looking back on 30 years of encountering one another, as in-person encounters have been put on hold. We reflect on the past with a deep longing to be together again. You are invited to read through this newsletter and to savour stories that span the decades of Romero House. They are moments shared by residents, workers and neighbours who at one time called this community home. Since COVID has entered our lives, we now realize how sacred these memories are.

I also want to thank you for your accompaniment and support at this particular time. It has not been an easy year for anyone. There are many groups of people who have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic, including refugee claimants. The support of our wider community has enabled Romero House to be there for hundreds of refugee families who have faced challenges on multiple fronts. This has involved navigating an immigration system that has moved online, including the complexity of holding virtual refugee hearings.

## **(Continued)**

In recent months, Romero House has worked hard to advocate for the rights of refugees who are being kept out of Canada by the Border Ban in effect at the US-Canada border. We support measures that ensure public health, but we are pushing hard for all refugee claimants to be considered an essential humanitarian exception. We don't need to choose between public health and protecting refugees.

We move forward in hope that the clouds will soon part. We are grateful to have had a mobile vaccine clinic at Romero House, thanks to the good folk at Women's College Hospital. It was the first step to getting back on that Lula Lounge dance floor. Hope to see you there soon.

## **MARKING SIGNIFICANT MOMENTS**

### **Good News!**

Many refugee families received good news - We celebrate a positive refugee hearing decision, a successful Humanitarian and Compassionate Application (9 years later!), Family Reunification for a family who has been separated for nearly 5 years, and Permanent Residence status for the Franco family!

### **New Board Members!**

We welcome two new Board Members, Shahid Aktar and Amensisa Ketema

### **New Summer Workers!**

We welcome two new Summer Workers, Carmen and Antonio!

## **In Memoriam**



### **Honouring Kathleen Hatcher**

We mourn the loss of Kathleen Hatcher, a wonderful friend and supporter of Romero House. We celebrate her beautiful life and are so grateful for her gifts. Kathleen and her Quilter's Guild gifted Romero House families with beautiful handmade quilts and blankets over the years, gifts which will continue to bring warmth and comfort to our homes.



### **Honouring Aaron Berhane**

We mourn the loss of Aaron Berhane to COVID-19. Aaron was a beloved member of PEN Canada and Writers In Exile. For almost 20 years, Aaron maintained vocal opposition to oppression in Eritrea, and offered tireless support for the Eritrean community in Canada. Aaron's voice commanded attention and he had a warm, wonderful smile. He was a Great Spirit and will be deeply missed.

# VOICES FROM OUR NEIGHBOURS

**By our neighbours on Wanda Road, The Leckie Family - Keith,  
Mary, Toban, Kate, & Sean**

Almost thirty years ago my wife Mary and I and our young growing family moved into our house at the corner of Wanda and Indian Road just 6 days before Christmas. We quickly heard rumblings about a refugee shelter on Wanda Road. Grumblings really. "There goes the neighbourhood". "What will happen to property values?" Homeowners who had been on Wanda for years were terrified.

Enter a woman with intense blue eyes who knocked on our door on Christmas Eve to invite us to a New Year's Day party. A refugee had just arrived from East Africa to be reunited with his wife and children after years spent as an innocent man in a brutal prison. Would we like to come and join in the feast and celebrate this great event?

The day arrived and with a little trepidation Mary and I showed up with a bottle of wine. We were immediately swept up in joy and food and wine and kindness. This meal was not any old roasted turkey. We had curried turkey, tagine stewed turkey, turkey stir fried rice, all kinds of food from the wonderful cooks in the house.....and music and dancing and more joy. We were blown away by the love and tearful thankfulness of this wonderful community.

That blue eyed woman was of course Mary Jo Leddy, who we count as a great neighbour and dear friend. This was the first of many years of arrivals, reunions and celebrations that we have been honoured to be a part of. Our three kids have grown up with the changing faces of kids arriving from all parts of the globe, welcoming them into a game of B-Ball or showing them the ropes on Wanda Road. Romero House has become part of the fabric of their lives and their narratives too.

Romero House has been the absolute warm heart of our community opening us up to international customs and festivals like the joyful WANDA STREET PARTY where generations of former refugees return to see old friends and neighbours and to celebrate life. Romero House is a gift that has opened the whole world to our children and our neighbourhood. We love you so much for who you are and what you have given us.



**Wanda Street Party**



**The Leckie family, 1992**

# LESSONS FROM THE NEIGHBOURHOOD

By Mary Jo Leddy, Romero House Founder

In 1970 I came to Toronto to do graduate studies. I planned to stay for two years. It has been 30 years now. I have learned a few things, one of the most important being the lessons of a neighbourhood.

## **Lesson #1: Neighbourhoods take a long time to build.**

In the beginning, our reasons for locating in this neighbourhood were largely functional: it was near a subway, a hospital, schools, a mosque and churches, and grocery stores. It was a "No Name" neighbourhood where real estate was affordable. When we moved into our three houses, the neighbourhood reaction was often painful. The neighbourhood was defined more by who and what it was against then by what it was for. Gradually we formed real relationships with a few of our neighbours, and after five years Tony Rebelo decided to throw a Street Party. It was a marvelous success. Together we had found something to celebrate.

As the Street Party became an annual event, the neighbourhood began to take shape. Some of the neighbours realized that living in a "No Name" neighbourhood meant being without political power in important discussions about local issues. A months-long naming process was held and after many meetings, this area had a name: The West Bend. A local residents association was formed and neighbours began taking responsibility at monthly meetings. The residents of Romero House contributed time and energy to this process.

Very slowly, Romero House was seen as an asset in the neighbourhood rather than a liability. The neighbourhood became a very good place to welcome refugees to Canada. This process took place over 20 years.

**Lesson #2: A neighbourhood is shaped by a sense of the common good.**

**Lesson #3: A Neighbourhood is a shared responsibility.**

The street is the place we hold in common. It is where we meet others who may not be friends or relatives but we live in relationship with each other – not too close and not too far. The street is the example of other realities that we hold in common: the trees, the water, the air, and the parks. We are responsible for the safety of each other, the flow of traffic, and the care for our garbage and gardens.

This is why the West Bend is concerned about the massive developments being proposed for the neighbourhood.\* We are responsible for this little place where we live. It is not only a chunk of earth, a piece of real estate to be bought and sold for profit.

The Romero Centre on Bloor West is now in the path of the massive development proposed for Dundas West and Bloor. This intersection has become what is called "a transit hub" linking Go Trains, UPX, a station for subway, bus and street cars. It is a developers dream and a possible nightmare for the neighbourhood.

We have become involved in public panels to discuss the potential and the problems that we face as a neighbourhood. Many people have been unaware of the significance of decisions made for them, without them. The good news is that the situation in the neighbourhood is now quite different from that which we faced 30 years ago. We now know this is a neighbourhood. We care for this place.

**\*Further information about the proposed developments can be found at [thewestbend.ca](http://thewestbend.ca)**

# SPACES WE INHABIT

We asked former residents and workers to think about physical spaces at Romero House that hold significance for them. What happened in these spaces? How do they represent what Romero House means to you? Join us as we take a trip down memory lane!

## **Janice Sanford Beck, Former Worker (1997 - 1998)**

Romero House is a community of people in transition, so maybe it is not surprising that the physical space that comes to my mind is neither stationary nor permanent. One of my first experiences of Romero House was piling into the blue 16-passenger Romero van with the other interns, getting to know one another as we headed north for our orientation canoe trip. The van played a key role in other Romero adventures throughout the year, including taking a crew of Romero youth to the Royal Ontario Museum and to a screening of *Titanic*. But perhaps most memorable is the celebratory singing that rocked the van after a particularly nerve-wracking refugee hearing. This jubilant moment highlights the fact that the van was not for solo travellers; it was a vehicle for a *community* on the move.



**Workers, formerly known as Volunteers, 1997 (From left to right) Shawn Sanford Beck, Erin McNamee, Norbert Piche, and Janice Sanford Beck. On the far right, canoe trip leader Chris**

## SPACES WE INHABIT (CONTINUED)

### **Ghidei, Former Resident (1991 - 1992) (Translated by her daughter Entisar)**

When my children and I arrived to Canada in 1991, we lived on the 3rd floor at Keele. Rita (Mary Jo's mom) and Miriam (a young single girl) were living on the 2nd floor. After I put my children to sleep at 8pm, the three of us (Rita, Miriam and myself) would meet in the second floor living room; this was a special space to me. Almost every night, I would make a snack or dinner to share with Rita and Miriam. These evenings were filled with gestured communication, uncontrollable laughter and always dancing (often to Tigrinya [Eritrean] music). We had such wonderful times there. We were all so happy. Rita often said, "I am supposed to be taking care of you ladies, but you end up taking care of me." These memories remind me that Romero House means community and communication – that is, gestures, uncontrollable laughter and dancing.



### **Zeinab Warah, Former Resident (1991)**

Romero house was our first family and support system in Canada. Once a year we would take a week-long trip to the Anishinabe Spiritual Centre along with many others in the Romero House community. I have fond memories of us cooking together and sharing with each other our favorite cultural dishes. Our kids would be involved most of the day with different activities like hiking, swimming, and fishing and they loved it. At nights we would all get together for bonfires or have events like our annual costume party. These memories mean so much to me and my kids. Experiences we could never forget and still reminisce about today.



### **Paola Bresba, Former Worker (1998 - 2000 ; 2002 - 2004)**

Parkside was our fourth house during the nineties, before the Centre was built. Whenever the extended community got together – for Women's group, liturgy, a party, meetings - we packed into Parkside. It seemed to expand as needed. We filled the living room, spilled into the kitchen, up the staircase, into the back and front yards, and onto the sidewalk. For lack of room, we sat on the floor at each other's feet – as you would at any other family gathering. During parties Muna and her brother worked their way through the room giving three-cheeked Eritrean kisses to all. We were loud. We lingered. Parkside embodied the joyful energy of Romero House.



## SPACES WE INHABIT (CONTINUED)

# The Centre

In 2002, we acquired the Centre. It has become the core of Romero House, true to its name. We gather at the Centre in many different capacities, joining together to eat, dream, party, and learn. The Centre is a place of support and welcome, beginnings and hopes for the future.

### **Emily Shephard, Former Worker (2006)**

The Centre is amazing because it is so adaptable and welcoming. It is a direct reflection of Romero House for me because it welcomes everyone. It can be used for anything from a formal anniversary party to an after-school club to potluck meetings. Even though the space is busy, it always feels organized and warm. It is the first entrypoint for many people to Romero House and I couldn't imagine a better space.



### **Sarah Villager-Klaas, Former Worker & Director (2007 - 2009 ; 2010 - 2014)**

The Centre stands out as a special place of encounter and beginnings. This space has always been graced by lovely plants, brightly coloured walls, and comfortable seating around a coffee table. It is a space that has hosted a food program, community gatherings, difficult discussions, and so many celebrations. It is a space of vulnerability, relationships, openness, hope, reunions, and perhaps most importantly, welcome. This space has shaped how I imagine and dream about my own home - may the physical space my family inhabits give shape to these same qualities.



### **Paola Vargas, Former Resident (2016 - 2017)**

When we landed in Canada, we were afraid and sad. I was 7 months pregnant and we felt alone. Romero House became our family and the instrument that God sent to protect us. The Centre is always open for everybody in the community, it is a big family room filled with love and peace, where people from all over the world can meet together and never feel lonely or vulnerable again.



## SPACES WE INHABIT (CONTINUED)

### **Naman Thamir, Former Resident (2003 - 2004)**

A space that was significant to me was the basement of Dorval House. Dorval does not get a lot of attention, but for anyone who has lived there it was special. Even though it was only a 2-bedroom space, for me it felt like a castle. It was a sense of relief and after that, new, good things began to happen for us, which was all thanks to the care that Romero House gave us at Dorval.



### **Winnie Machuba, Former Resident (2013)**

I came to Canada in September 2013, and I lived at Keele and then at Wanda. My baby was born in the community and he saw everyone as related to him. He was a baby of everyone's hands. In the liturgy or any Romero House event, he felt secure and comfortable to play. Moving far from Romero has been a challenge for us, we miss the feeling of belonging we had.



### **Salvator, Former Worker (2013 - 2015)**

An important space was always Wanda Road - not just the house I lived in, but the whole street that opened up to our parties, the neighbours who were welcoming and supportive, and the fact that we could all live together in such a beautiful part of the city. It really made the difference for our sense of community and, I believe, for our companions' sense of belonging in a new country. I will never forget the street party, when I served dunk tank duty! Wanda Road represents the good food, lively parties, and sense of solidarity and togetherness within the broader neighbourhood and city that I will always associate with my time at Romero House.



# The Art and Joy of Sharing Food

**Sharing food is timelessly at the core of Romero House - no matter the season, food brings us together. This article is written by Residents Noorman and Domitillah, who love sharing their gift. (And we love eating their food!)**

We share so many things in our life, from books to clothes, from money to homes and from laughs to tears. Sharing is something very special. We share to show care and to build trust. Most special of all is sharing food. The art and joy of sharing food comes from the spirit of sacrificing. There is a famous idiom "the way to a man's heart is through his stomach." I will say that the way to anyone's heart is through their stomach.

We came to Canada during this pandemic. We didn't know where to go and who to reach out to and we were struggling. We prayed so hard to be able to get food for our kids and also a roof over our head. Our prayers were answered. We had so many angels helping us to pass through a rough passage. I remember when we walked out on the road and to the park where we saw many homeless people and once we passed by a sign saying "No home, No food, No job, family to feed. Anything helps. God Bless you."

This sign gave my husband the thought of offering food to the hungry on the streets so we started to share food, giving hot cooked meals to the homeless around us. In the neighbourhood people started to smell the aroma of my husband's cooking and we started to cook for all our neighbours and they loved it. I always say my husband cooks with love; it is just another form of sharing. When you offer food to the needy and hungry, it makes them feel happy to the seventh sky and this happiness is easily visible in their eyes. No matter if you know them or not, no matter if you will see them again or not, this single moment of sharing your food will be always remembered. It brings tears to our eyes. The art of sharing food is a blessing and joy to us. This will always be a memorable moment throughout our life and we will keep on 'Cooking for Love' and serving the needy.



**Noorman cooking Kerala Dum Lamb Briyani, Kurma Curry, and Onion Chutney for the Workers**

## The Art and Joy of Sharing Food (Continued)

By Sayan Supratim Das, Worker and Foodie Extraordinaire

We are surrounded by cooks. Some are chefs. And then there are epicureans. This is a big word for those who love food. Noorman to me is an epicurean. He cooks not as a chore or profession (he is a trained chef), but because the spices are his friends and the kitchen is his playground. In his food, you can sample his endless enthusiasm. I can feel him sing as I drink his soup. When I cut into his chicken curry, I can feel his feet tap dance to the tunes of the richly flavoured tomatoes and onions.

He is fearless in the kitchen, deciding on recipes that push his traditional knowledge to merge with the modern. Noorman does not take his instrument for granted. His food tells us stories of his life and introduces us to the delights of today. In his affluent magical abilities, Noorman is an envoy of flavour, an epicurean who stretches what is possible in the kitchen and in the process elevates what spices can achieve.



# With Gratitude

We are SO grateful for the continued support from our community. These 30 years would not have been possible without YOU! We want to recognize the gifts we receive in many forms - gifts of friendship, encouragement, volunteer hours, advocacy efforts, monetary and in-kind donations, and so many more!



**Residents staying cozy with the quilts we received from Kathleen and the Etobicoke Quilter's Guild**



**We give thanks for the team from Women's College Hospital who ran a mobile vaccine clinic**



**We are so grateful for the support we receive from Abby's Goal - from skates to camping gear, we have had so many adventures!**

## Ways you can give financially

**By Cheque:** Make your cheque payable to Romero House and sent it to the address below.

**Stocks and Securities:** Romero House now accepts Donations of stocks and securities. This can be done online through our Canada Helps page at  
<https://www.canadahelps.org/en/charities/romero-house/>

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

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



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