

FALL NEWSLETTER



BUILDING COMMUNITY



The photos on this cover show special moments during the last six months: The worker appreciation party, one of the Woman's group outings, our children going back to school and the Street Party.

Letter from the Executive Director

FRANCESCA ALLODI-ROSS



I used to wonder often whether my daily actions really mattered. The problems of the world are massive and our lifetimes are so short; how can we hope to make a difference? Romero House has touched the lives of thousands of refugees, but there are thousands more who need our support.

These days I find comfort and inspiration from three places in particular: Dr. Martin Luther King Jr's words that "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice;" from Saint Oscar Romero's prayer, that we can't do everything, but we can do something, "a step along the way"; and from adrienne maree brown's *Emergent Strategy*, which describes how "what we practice at the small scale sets the patterns for the whole system."

I see and feel the wisdom of these words each day at Romero House. I notice the way our relatively simple interactions are essential to creating the world we want. I see this in the stories of many of the authors in this newsletter:

- Lori Neale describes neighbours of Romero House offering apartments and rooms to refugees. Will it solve Toronto's housing crisis? No, but it helps. It keeps a Mexican mother from sleeping under a bridge because the shelters are too full or too frightening for her young son. It means a young Iraqi couple can afford their rent as they work entry-level jobs and begin to

rebuild their professional lives. It raises awareness and support amongst our neighbours for political candidates with serious housing strategies.

- A Hazara Shia and a Sunni Muslim, breaking fast together at our Eid celebration in May, learned about each other's beliefs and practices. Will it solve ethnic conflicts in Afghanistan? No, but how will we have a peaceful world without these conversations?

- The mural on the back of our office, painted by refugees and volunteers decades ago

"We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that. This enables us to do something and to do it very well. It may be incomplete but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest."

Excerpt from the Prayer of Oscar Romero

- inspired a new volunteer, William, to come through our doors and offer his time and spirit. Will art save the world? No, but how can we imagine the world we want without art and the creativity it inspires?
- Marin Lehmann-Bender's experience living at Romero House inspired her career in refugee sponsorship. Will her work correct

the fact that Canada welcomes relatively few refugees compared to other countries? No, but it connects more Canadians with refugees on a personal level, motivating more support for welcoming refugees.

All of us are transformed by our interactions here in the Romero House community, sometimes in ways we recognize as life-changing, sometimes imperceptibly. We know the generosity of a stranger; experience a new perspective on things we took for granted; we choose to trust people from a place we have heard bad things about. That is the kind of world I want to live in, and I am blessed to live and work in a community where we exercise the muscles that will make this possible.

SEEKING THE WISDOM OF THE STREETS

MARY JO LEDDY

Romero House Founder

You would be blind not to see the intense development which is taking place in the small neighbourhood, which is the location of the four Romero houses and the community centre. During the two years, a period often called “Covid” time, ten buildings have been in the process of completion. More to come. **If only these buildings were “affordable.”**

Two years ago, the Romero House board realized the need for an initiative in this rapidly developing situation. They decided to ask a small group of “advisors” to assess the situation: Fr. Jack Costello, one of the founders of Romero, spent time talking to the homeless along Parliament Street. Domitillah Antoinette, a former Romero refugee and recent recipient of a Canadian architectural degree, ran and won the leadership of the residents association. Kathy Mansfield, our nurse at St Joseph’s Hospital, worked with other housing groups in the city. Barbara Gordon, the actress who welcomed refugees into her home, was able to organize many meetings about housing in the neighbourhood. Shahid Akhtar, a conflict resolution mediator, was able to navigate the corporate world. David Walsh, a real estate wizard, who long ago helped Romero House access the four houses, kept us apprised of corporate and political developments. And myself, willing to learn, needing to learn.

For the last two years, the advisors went out seeking wisdom. They began to meet every week, initially on Friday afternoons and then on Wednesday mornings at 7:00 a.m. They joined several citizen groups in the city and got involved in electoral issues. Most importantly, they talked with people experiencing homelessness. Finally, they listened to the desperation of the Romero team about the need for affordable housing for refugees.

The Romero team was desperate enough to develop a new program, the “community host program.” This program reflected the spirit of Romero House – welcoming newcomers and strangers into one’s home until finding more permanent housing.

Contact communityhost@romerohouse.org if you would like to join the community host program. The Advisory Group will be issuing its report in the New Year.

THE SUPPORT IN OUR NEIGHBOURHOOD

OSAMA AND CHOVIN

Former Romero House Residents

Living around Romero House gives Chovin and me a peaceful mind. Because knowing that there is a community that will support you is very crucial to every refugee and newcomer. We were very inexperienced and worried when we first landed in Toronto. Living in Romero House allowed us to replace emotions like fear with beautiful community moments that we will treasure forever. Therefore, we decided to continue living in the neighbourhood after being independent and continuing to give back to our community!



Conjuring Empathy: How Art Motivates Me to Care About Refugees and Migrants

WILLIAM BRERETON

Romero House Volunteer

I have never forgotten the first artwork I directly encountered at an art museum/gallery that explicitly addresses the refugee and migrant experience in art. Produced by Zimbabwe-born, South Africa-based artist Dan Halter, he applied new and used plastic-weave shopping bags to create *Rifugiato Mappa del Mondo* (Refugee Map of the World). I stumbled upon the artwork while visiting the Albright-Knox Art Gallery (Buffalo) a few years ago – my visitor experience as a whole moved me deeply. It later proved to be timely as I have experienced a life-quake and thus carry a newfound value for the power of art for conjuring empathy among us.

To introduce myself, I completed my graduate studies in art history and function in the arts and culture sector (from serving in public programming roles in museums and galleries to contributing as an independent arts writer/editor). Living in places such as Buffalo and Toronto influences my thinking of cities as vital community hubs for refugees and migrants and how we, as global citizens, can solidify those ties. I have valued seeing museums and galleries presenting group exhibitions that advocate and give awareness to refugee and migrant issues. Two examples come to the forefront: *Sanctuary* at the Aga Khan Museum (Toronto) and *The Warmth of Other Suns: Stories of Global Displacement* at the Phillips Collection (Washington, D.C.). Many of these artists from around the globe have direct lived experience as refugees or migrants and, in turn, have channeled art to serve their activist work.

While waiting for the TTC at Dundas West in late 2021/early 2022, Romero House's gorgeous "We Rise" mural spoke to me. Positioned on the back façade of The Centre on Bloor, the imagery consists of tree roots and outstretched hands releasing a monarch butterfly on one side and doves resting on red maple leaves on the other. On a neighbouring building, another mural reads "Come-Unity" (it helps that I have a soft spot for doves). I felt motivated at that point to 'walk the

talk.' Even though I only volunteer a few hours per week, my time at Romero House has been fulfilling. The gratitude from staff and residents – past and present – always fill my heart.

Fortuitously, I came across two photography exhibitions last September 2022 – *Migration Stories Whispered in My Ear / Me Susurran Al Oído* Historias de Migrantes at McIntosh Gallery (London) and *Legacies of Forced Migration* at CEPA Gallery (Buffalo) – that position and center undocumented migrants' experience of living in and travelling across Mexico's borders. Each exhibition featured photographs of fellow migrants, along with their testimonies (at times heartbreaking, at other times hopeful). Experiencing these respective presentations confirms my inner need to continue collaborating with and caring about refugees and migrants through community building and advocacy.

There is much for me to still learn at Romero House – after all, the journey, not the destination, sustains inner growth. I will continue to rely on art as my spirit guide to help me become a better ally for refugees and migrants locally in Toronto and globally.



THE SAFE THIRD COUNTRY AGREEMENT GOES TO THE SUPREME COURT

SARAH BUISMAN
Romero House Worker

This year on October 6, the Supreme Court of Canada heard the appeal regarding the Safe Third Country Agreement. A group of lawyers from Amnesty International, The Canadian Council of Churches, and the Canadian Council for Refugees argued that the Safe Third Country Agreement, held between the US and Canada, is unconstitutional.

The Safe Third Country Agreement (STCA) began in 2004 and designated the US as a safe country for refugees. The result is that when people present themselves at the Canada-US border to make a refugee claim in Canada, they are returned to the US unless they meet one of the exceptions to the Agreement. Many of those people are unjustly arrested in the United States, and some are forcibly returned to their country of origin, where they are not safe.

The US can be unsafe for refugees! Some of the detention conditions in the US are appalling, including solitary confinement, mass cells, inadequate medical care, and abusive treatment by guards. Detention is not done by assessing an individual's risk to public security or flight risk but often arbitrarily or for political reasons. There are significant barriers to people accessing lawyers and legal processes to make their claims in the US.

In addition, women are disproportionately harmed by being sent back to the United States. The United States has restrictions on recognizing gender-based refugee claims, resulting in women who have fled gender-based violence being returned to that violence in their home country.

These factors force refugees to enter Canada irregularly because most people would be returned to the United States if they present themselves at an official border crossing. This can be dangerous for refugees, especially if they cross the border during the winter. Repealing the STCA would allow refugee claimants to present themselves in an orderly manner at official border crossings.



During the Supreme Court hearing, government lawyers argued that safeguards exist for people who could be in danger if they are returned to the United States. The team of refugee lawyers agreed that these safeguards exist in theory; however, they are not accessible to people at the border in the mere hours before they are returned to the United States. In other words, individuals do not have time to access these processes, nor are they offered information about their options.

The Safe Third Country Agreement impacts many of the folks we work with and many more who cannot get here due to the Agreement. Along with several Toronto organizations that support refugee claimants, we helped organize a rally on October 6 to raise awareness about the harmful impacts of the STCA and show solidarity for the legal team.

We expect a decision from the Supreme Court about the STCA in the next few months. In the meantime, we continue to work with people who came to Canada despite the STCA and educate refugees in the United States about the Agreement so they can understand their options.



Building



We celebrate



The citizenship of Maria Jose Marcano, Alexander Duarte, and their family.



The positive decision in the Llamas Villaseñor family's case.



The positive decision in the Yulieth's family case.



Community



Welcome

Moses is a new member of our team. He is our Intake Coordinator and runs the community host program



Suyeon also joined us in September as well. She is our community programming coordinator.



The Hazara in Afghanistan

MASOOMA AHMADI
Romero House Teen Resident

Thousands of kilometres away from my homeland, here I am, sitting in my English class thinking about the students and the people dying for being Hazara. At least 163 students were killed in a suicide bombing in Afghanistan on September 30, 2022. As I scroll through social media I see some familiar faces who are no longer alive. About a year and a half ago I was going to the same school where the explosion occurred. I can't control my emotions when I see the news about the deadly attacks against my people. I don't understand why someone dies because of their race.

The Hazaras are an ethnic minority and most of them are Shia Muslims. They are a highly persecuted ethnic group in Afghanistan. They live mainly in the central parts of the country and are mostly labourers, but their low income has never prevented them from sending their children to school. They are one of the most peaceful, hardworking and open people in Afghanistan. The Hazaras have been victims of genocide and massacred since 1893. When Hazaras didn't give up their authority to Amir Abdul Rahman Khan, the Pashtun king of Afghanistan, He invaded Hazarajat (Hazara's old land), killed over 60% of Hazara, and brought thousands of Hazaras as slaves to Kabul (the Capital of Afghanistan).

After a century, these persecutions and massacres are still ongoing issues for Hazaras. Hazaras have been victims of massacres committed by the Taliban, al-Qaeda, Daesh, and other extremist groups for being Shia Muslims. According to Aljazeera: "The Hazaras say they are considered outsiders in their own country and have been persecuted throughout history. In the late 1900s, Pashtun King Amir Abdul Rahman Khan ordered the killing of all Shias in central Afghanistan, leaving tens of thousands of Hazaras dead, according to anthropologist Thomas Barfield. Hazaras were sold as slaves as late as the 19th century."

There is a compilation of targeted attacks only on Hazara's schools and educational centers: September 2022, at Kaaj Educational center, at least 163 were killed & injured. April 2022, at Abdul Rahim Shahid High School, at least 90 were killed & injured. April 2022, at Mumtaz educational center, at least 26 were killed & injured. May 2021, at Sayid Al Shohada Girls' School, at least 232 were killed & injured. October 2020, at Kawsar Danish educational center, at least 81 were killed & injured. August 2018, at Mawood Educational center, at least 115 were killed & injured. In December 2017, at Tabian cultural center, at least 125 were killed and injured

According to an AP report on June 21, 2021, Hazaras have been targeted at schools, weddings, mosques, sports clubs, and even at births. A terrorist attack on a maternity hospital in the West of Kabul where most Hazaras live killed 24 people, including two newborn babies, mothers, and nurses. Based on a statistic a Hazara has been killed every five days in Afghanistan for the past two decades. It shows the high violence and insecurity these people face.

Why Hazara genocide has not been recognized yet?

- Throughout history, all kings and presidents of Afghanistan have been Pashtuns (the ethnic majority in Afghanistan). Amir Abdul Rahman Khan was a Pashtun king who killed more than half of the Hazara population, so the Afghan government has never recognized the genocide and always tried hard to cover it up. No one at schools or places with dominant Pashtuns is allowed to speak about the Hazara genocide or what Amir Abdul Rahman did to these people. All historical books are censored by the government, so when there are not enough valid sources available how could you aware people of their past?
- Lack of international media attention is another factor affecting this. Unfortunately, international media often do not cover things happening in Afghanistan. Double standardization is another huge problem in global media. No Afghanistan news would be covered by international media unless it's a huge disaster.

- The new government in Afghanistan (Afghanistan Islamic Emirate) is all Pashtun Taliban. The Taliban massacred Hazaras for years. They call Hazaras infidels to bring Shia Muslims, so they give themselves the right to kill them. Therefore, they hate Hazaras and would never acknowledge the genocide. However, they condemn the latest attacks on Hazaras to pretend they have been changed and care about all nations, just to be recognized as a legitimate government.

What needs to be done?

Hazaras have been victims of genocide for over a century, they are systematically killed and discriminated against in Afghanistan. The United Nations should assign a group to research the genocide happening in Afghanistan and the torture Hazaras face. Global media and news should cover these humanitarian crises happening in Afghanistan, so people across the world know the pain Hazaras are suffering from. Hazara families who have lost their children and dears need to know: Why they should live in constant fear of being killed? Is it a crime to be a Hazara? Isn't it every human's right to live?



THE ROMERO HOUSE PATH

MARIN LEHMANN-BENDER

Former Romero House Worker

It is hard to imagine how our lives would be if we had chosen different paths. Ten years ago, I walked through the doors of Romero House for the first time to live and work there for one year. I knew on the first day that I wanted to stay for a second year.

Looking back, it is clear that Romero House has shaped my life profoundly. It directed me on a professional path, exploded my social life, and helped me mature substantially.

I was born and raised in Toronto, and my experience of this city was small and sheltered. Working at Romero House allowed me to explore Toronto, especially seeing it through the eyes of families whose realities were so different from mine, those who so generously let me into their lives.

Since leaving Romero House I have been working in the private sponsorship program. I work with refugees from all over the world and help sponsorship groups welcome them to Canada. I was hired as a sponsorship facilitator and I became a co-director a few years ago.

The knowledge and exposure I gained at Romero House formed the foundation on which I continue to build my professional life. I had the opportunity to interpret for Spanish-speaking residents and walk-ins. Since then, I have gradually turned interpreting and translating for immigration attorneys into a side job.

I was very impressed by the kindness I saw in some of the people at Romero House, which inspired me to give people the benefit of the doubt. Many of my dearest friends are members of families that came through the doors of Romero House. I can't imagine my life without them.

Lastly, Romero House showed me a model of living with others. My dream is to live in a home with others beyond my nuclear family. Although I have not yet been able to do so, I know I will.

I think of life as a series of roads with intersections where we turn in one direction or another. Romero House opened me up and made me appreciate how much freedom I have had to choose my path. So much of what I am, who I am and what I do personally and professionally is because 10 years ago I chose Romero House, and Romero House chose me. It was the best thing I ever did in my life, I will always be grateful.

Comment from one of our residents

JOSEPH KAWEESA
Romero House Resident

There is nothing more challenging in life than being a refugee. Imagine you went through a very tough time in your own country being tormented by your very own countryman man. We were faced with fear and uncertainty about coming here not knowing what to expect if things turned worse for us in our own motherland and what's gonna happen now in Canada. That was the question we kept asking ourselves.

We are very grateful to the Romero community for treating us like their own blood. Here at Romero, we found refuge and homage. Our hearts are restored knowing someone cares! We got a new family and a community where you need not fear for your life.

We are fed, housed, and supported in all ways a stranger couldn't deserve.
Thank you for your encouragement and love!
We know that someday we shall get there!
May God richly bless, Romero, the staff and the residents!



**SOMOS
GENERADORES
DE ESPERANZA
SIN FECHA DE
CADUCIDAD**

**(WE ARE
GENERATORS
OF HOPE WITH
NO EXPIRATION
DATE)**

**PHOTO AND NOTE BY MERCY
VERDUGO**

**MEXICAN ARTIST AND ROMERO
HOUSE SERVICE USER**

HOME SWEET HOME - HELP MAKE THE CONNECTION

LORI NEALE

Romero House Board Member

Dorothy Day of the Catholic Worker movement was once asked, how do you start a Catholic Worker house? Her response was, "You open the door." As a full-time volunteer at Romero House from 1998-1999, I got to open the door and welcome many strangers who soon became friends.

As a Romero worker, one of the hardest challenges was helping residents find an apartment to move to after their time at Romero House. The first challenge was the high cost of rent compared to their monthly income. Then, even if we found an apartment with a doable rent, it would usually be far away from the subway lines and from Romero House, their first home in Canada. Navigating new neighbourhoods, we would arrange to see the apartment and meet the landlord. In sharp contrast to the welcome these families received at Romero House, the residents often faced steep competition and skeptical landlords. It was discouraging and upsetting to see wonderful people who would make very respectful and responsible tenants have doors closed in their faces.

Now 25 years later, I am a home-owner living not far from Romero House. You can imagine my delight when I contact Romero House when an apartment in our house is up for rent, and said, "Do you know a family set to move out of Romero House who would like to live upstairs?"

Francesca Allodi-Ross, the Executive Director, and the current workers can vouch for the families and can extend the invitation to the best match to come see the apartment.

Our house is an expression of and a catalyst for the development of the Rutilio Grande community. Blessed Rutilio Grande, S.J. was a good friend of Saint Oscar Romero and was martyred for his work with the poor and his strong convictions: "The material world is for everyone, without borders. A common table with a tablecloth big enough for everyone, like this eucharist. Each one with a seat so that each one comes to the table to eat."

In addition to our annual tree decorating party,

Thanksgiving, and Open House, the house has been host to numerous birthday parties, baby showers, good food box pick-ups, Kid Fun Fridays, and monthly faith-sharing gatherings. This year, 2022, is a very special year for our community. First, Rutilio Grande was beatified in January at Plaza Divino del Mundo in San Salvador, El Salvador. Second, Rutilio Grande House celebrated its 15th year which we commemorated with our Summer get-together barbecue. Looking back over the years, the beautiful faces of so many who live and have lived at Rutilio Grande house and so many who have been and continue to be part of this graced experience through prayer, action and gatherings are testimony to God's love in the world. It is powerful to see the lasting impact of learning to "open the door" at Romero House continues to have.

While the vision of our house is unique, there are others in the extended Romero community who similarly let Romero House know when their daughter goes off to university and they have a spare bedroom, or the in-laws no longer use the basement suite, or an apartment unit they own or know about is available for rent. Many on a temporary basis also offer space when shelters are full through the community host program. You, or people you know, maybe in this situation and have often thought about trying to offer their unit or spare room to a newcomer but never knew how.

One of the gifts I received from Romero House is discovering what beautiful and joyous things can happen when we open our doors. If you haven't yet, I encourage you to help Romero House make this connection for you too and open yourself to the joys of living as good neighbours.

*Lori Neale, nee Ryan lives in the neighbourhood with her husband and daughter at the Rutilio Grande House and currently serves as the Romero House Board Chair. An earlier version of this article was published in 2014. **Call or email communityhost@romerohouse.org to learn more about the Community Host program or if you know about a rental unit available.***

WAYS YOU CAN CONTINUE TO SUPPORT OUR WORK

DONATE THROUGH OUR WEBSITE

You can donate once or become a monthly donor by choosing "Donate Monthly" on our website. You have the ability to use a credit card, Paypal, Google Pay and even Canada Help gift cards.
<https://www.romerohouse.org/get-involved/donors-supporters/donations/>

STOCKS AND SECURITIES

We accept donations of stocks and securities. Please go to our website at
<http://bit.ly/3O812aX>

BY CHEQUE

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

LEGACY PROGRAM

If you would like to leave a gift in your will, please email us at fundraising@romerohouse.org and a member of our team will contact you to discuss the details.

WE ENCOURAGE YOU TO CONSULT OUR ANNUAL REPORT, YOU WILL BE ABLE TO SEE WHAT WE HAVE WORKED ON IN THE PAST YEAR.



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