

WINTER NEWSLETTER



BECOMING NEIGHBOURS



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About the newsletter

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Letter from the Executive Director

FRANCESCA ALLODI-ROSS

A lot of people look to Romero House for hope. I know I do. A volunteer from Germany this summer commented that it was an example of what refugee welcome could look like: a vibrant housing community in a friendly neighbourhood. I'm excited to share some of these hopeful stories in this newsletter. Joan Leishman describes her three-year journey supporting a young Iranian artist/activist and his mother to find safety in Canada. Mervendra Naidu describes the joy and connection of a soccer game amongst refugee houses in Toronto this summer. Everyone raves about Romero's family camp, an incredible week-long retreat for 43 residents, former residents, and staff, where we live together as one big extended family: singing, swimming, laughing, crying, and fishing.

And at the same time, these past few months have been challenging and my hope has been tested. As we prepare with joy for the cosiness of winter at Romero House—preparing gifts for families, hanging string lights as a house, singing together—we brace too for the heartbreak of the season. The desperate conversations with people at our doors looking for a bed to sleep as the temperatures dip and not knowing if we will find one. The sorrow many feel being away from loved ones and traditions during this holiday season. Feeling powerless amidst endless headlines of war.

The title for this season's newsletter comes from a partner organization, Becoming Neighbours. They offer mentorship, furniture, and other support to newly arrived migrants in the east end of Toronto. The title for me speaks to this complexity of heartwarming and despairing stories: what are the beautiful moments that bind us together; and what happens when our neighbours can't afford to live near us anymore?

It is this complexity that keeps my heart and hands committed to Romero House. The struggles that we face are what make it possible for the incredible joy we experience. In my life, I've found I can't have one without the other. I'm either open to feeling or I'm not. Romero House keeps my heart open, come what may. I hope it helps keep yours open too.

REFLECTIONS FROM OUR FOUNDER: FIELD HOSPITALS

MARY JO LEDDY

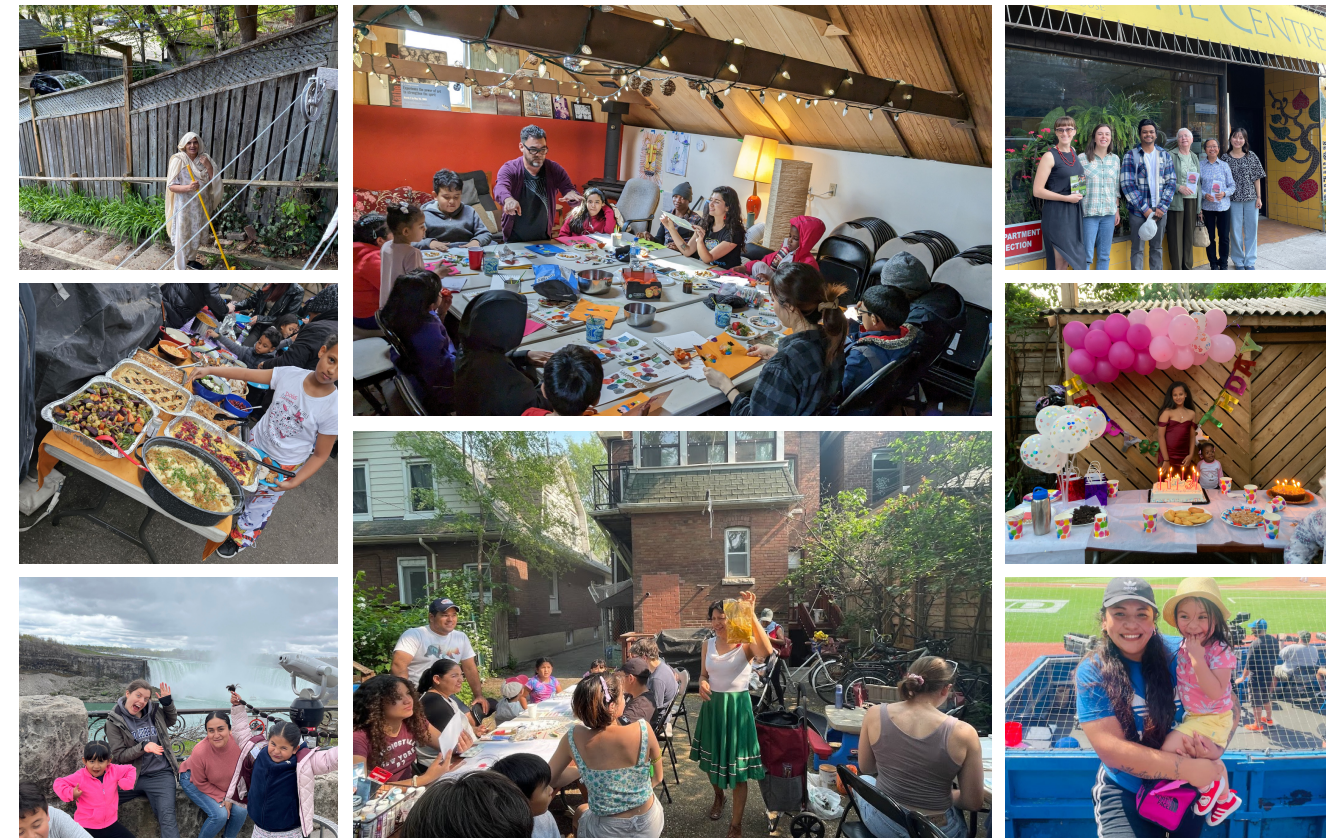
This fall I spent some time in various hospitals. It was an opportunity to reflect on the generous lives of my parents who spent most of their lives serving in hospitals. My stay in the hospital was mercifully short but meaningful. As I lay on the gurney in the hallway, it became a chance to reflect on the words of Pope Francis in which he compared the task of the church to the task of a Field Hospital. The teams of the Field Hospitals rush into the front lines to care for those who are bearing the brunt of battle.

The Pope described the very nature of the church as involving it in the process of healing the hearts of men and women who are suffering. Indeed, it involves it in the suffering of people of all religions who are suffering.

Pope Francis outlined this assertion in his beautiful description of the church itself as a field hospital:

I see clearly that the thing the church needs most today is the ability to heal wounds and to warm the hearts of the faithful; it needs nearness, proximity. I see the church as a field hospital after battle. It is useless to ask a seriously injured person if he has high cholesterol and about the level of his blood sugars. You have to heal his wounds. And you have to start from the ground up. This is the mission of the church: the church heals, it cures. . . The mission of the church is to heal wounds of the heart, to open doors, to free people, to say that God is good, God forgives all, God is the Father.

My time in the hospital helped me to imagine the role of the church and the role of Romero House as a field hospital rather than as a professional service. Every day the team of Romero House meets suffering in the face. Every day we are challenged to come nearer to the suffering of our siblings called refugees. The crisis of housing in the city of Toronto summons us all to imagine what we are doing is not only about affordable rent. It is about healing the wounds of the heart.



Ali's Journey

JOAN LEISHMAN
Romero House Volunteer

As we toured the McMaster campus in Hamilton we must have looked like Cheshire cats and after an agonizing and dangerous struggle, it certainly felt like we'd suddenly been tipped into a world as fantastical as Lewis Carroll's "Alices Adventures in Wonderland". Here, breathing freely at last, Ali Pouransari would begin his new life.

Rescuing Ali from the clutches of Iran's mullahs had taken almost three years. It began with Mary Jo Leddy and Ali's mother, Hoda Karimi Sadr, in my living room plotting how to get this 23-year-old man to Canada.

As an actor, musician, human rights activist, and blogger, Ali was repeatedly harassed and detained by Iran's Revolutionary Guard before being sentenced to 11 years in the Shibani Prison on charges of attempting to overthrow the Islamic state. After eight months in captivity, he was sent to a medical facility for treatment and managed to escape.

So, how to get a political prisoner on the run out of Iran? Mary Jo, "It's going to be difficult". Not impossible, just difficult.

Our first victory was getting Ali accepted into McMaster's MELD (McMaster English Language Development) program. Now, we had an invitation for Ali to study in Canada, but he needed to get to Turkey (the only country Iranians can get visitor visas to) to have biometrics done for a student visa application.

The elation of our McMaster victory was followed by heart-piercing defeats. Over the next months, IRCC refused our student visa application. Twice!

As we searched for other ways, Ali's mother Hoda, a journalist, freedom of speech defender, former political prisoner, who'd also escaped to Turkey, had violent phantom pains knowing what her son was suffering.

The regime continued to haunt them both with ugly threats on social media. Hoda would get mock pictures of her beheading; Ali of being dragged back bloody to prison.

Mary Jo and I would often talk several times a day. Mostly, she would encourage me not to give up; offer me insights from her decades of wisdom. Just when I felt all might be impossible, one of our political contacts suggested we apply to Canada's new immigration stream for Rights Defenders. It was a life saver, literally.

ProtectDefenders.eu can recommend refugee applications to the Rights Defender's stream. And victory! It accepted Ali's claim. Still, we couldn't imagine what was ahead. As the application was again being considered by IRCC, Ali was abducted and beaten by Farci speaking men in Istanbul. They threatened that he and his mother would be going back to prison in Iran one way or another.

The photos were bloody; Ali's nose and eyes pistol-whipped, pieces of flesh missing. I had them sent to IRCC to let them know the results of its' continual delays.

And then, finally, on August 3, Ali's Canadian visa was approved. Still, after so much anguish, our celebrations were muted. And it turned out, rightly so.

Iranians are granted three-month visas to Turkey. Ali would have to go to a police station to pay a fine for staying longer. Upon turning up to pay the fine, he was arrested thrown back in prison. Seven days before his flight to Canada, Ali was chained, beaten and trucked to Nevsehir Prison for deportation to Iran.

Could Ali possibly know we were still fighting for him? Could his mother, now hospitalized as stress shut down her body, possibly believe her son was not lost for ever?

Mary Jo and I relentlessly worked our contacts. A young man with a Canadian visa being deported back to prison in Iran? This is not the way our system is to work.

Imagine our joy when a thin, battered, but exuberant young man walked out of Arrivals at Pearson and into the embrace his mother or the first time in five torturous years!

Imagine the joy of a mother and son holding hands walking through the autumn, leafy, freedom of the McMaster campus with the smiles of a Cheshire cat.



[Left] Ali and mother Hoda at Pearson



[Top-right] Ali, mother Hoda, Mary Jo and Father Jack
[Bottom-right] Joan, Ali and Keith Leckie at a reading of Writers in Exile

PHOTOS BY JOAN LEISHMAN

Congrats!

Positive refugee decisions



[Left] Ali and Sughran
[Center] Agboola family (O. S., O. E., O. D., O. S., K. D.)
[Right] Jartu and Lamine



Ricardo & Jesica, Sandra & Pablo



Dionicio & Anyela and family



Robelin, Yini, Roderik & Danna



Permanent Residence



Osama and Chovin

Achievements

Diaspora Dialogues Announcement!



The Carol Shields Prize Foundation Fellowship at [Diaspora Dialogues](#) provides financial support to a woman or non-binary BIPOC writer who is a refugee or new immigrant to Canada. The stipend is intended to provide opportunity for a writer to create, freer from financial constraints. We are delighted to announce the first recipient of this fellowship: Sana'a Jaber!

Sana'a Jaber is an award-winning filmmaker and writer with over 18 years of experience. With a background in English Literature, she honed her craft at the Red Sea Institute of Cinematic Arts' MFA program, a joint venture of Steven Spielberg, King Abdullah of Jordan, and UCLA. In 2019, Sana'a and her small family crossed the American Border and sought asylum in Canada, escaping turmoil in Lebanon. Her work explores womanhood, motherhood, displacement, and the universal need to belong.

"I could never have done this without the support from Romero House community, I love you all"

- Sana'a

WELCOME



Karen Sierra joined staff April 2023. She is our Housing Access Coordinator and faithful volunteer of over 4 years. Karen has been doing an amazing job helping people find their perfect homes with persistence and a smile!



Marnie Klassen joined us our staff this September. Among her many talents, she has a wonderful gift for providing our team with delicious, homemade meals. She is our Volunteer Coordinator and part of the Worker program.

Warm welcome to our intake students and volunteers for 2023-2024: Candy Geraldino, Eric del Junco, Julio Valencia, Leslie Dolman, Nidia Suarez Ramirez, Sini Maury, Tim Whitford, and Yasmin Calderon Obregon. We are so grateful for their support of our walk-in program, offering settlement services to refugee claimants who live outside Romero House.

BECOMING NEIGHBOURS



Wedding



Salvator and Alison were married on August 13, 2022. Salvator was a Worker and Alison was a volunteer in the Kids' Club when they met at Romero House in 2013.

REMEMBERING JACQUES VERMEIREN (AUGUST 4, 1989 TO MAY 12, 2023)

Jacques Vermeiren was a refugee from Rwanda. He came to Canada in 2008, at the age of 18, and was a part of the Romero House community. In May 2023, he passed away suddenly at the age of 33.



Jacques playing with kids behind Dorval House



Ashbridges Bay

You were a beautiful soul Jacques. Thank you for all the visits that you made to Romero House over the years -- it was always joyful to welcome you through the doors to the Centre. Your smile and hugs graced us all. Peace to your spirit.
Jenn M.



Jacques, your smile, mischievous and full of joy, brightens the room and all of us lucky enough to cross your path. Sending all my love to your family and peace to your beautiful soul.
Rest in peace amigo,
Anthea (Romero House community)



Visiting Verene and Jayden after his successful Refugee hearing

Rest in peace
I will always remember Jacques' kindness, smile and faith. And his care and concern for others. May his heavy burdens be relieved and may he rest in God's eternal loving embrace.
My deepest condolences to his family.
- Lori, housemate at Rutilio Grande house in 2009



Jacques touched my life in many ways. He was a kind and respectful young man. He loved children. He bonded with my son, Jayden, from the first time they met. He was 19 or 20 years old at the time and Jayden was just three. Jacques looked childish in his face and was really cute. Meeting this boy from my country, I felt like he was my brother; for Jayden, he got an uncle (we say "tonton"). Wherever he went, there was happiness and warm conversation.
Verene Mukabera, Romero House Former Resident

First met you in Rwanda. Then later when you came to Canada. Will always remember you fondly. My sincere respect. Pat Reed.



Jacques and Remy

Jacques, our whole family loved you and we wished you a better life than the one you had to lead, but we always saw that shining face and wide smile, which were the outward signs of the grace that always surrounded you and carried you through all "the toils and snares" until you came safely home.
John & Elizabeth
Jessie, Kate and Clara



Seeing these pictures brings back so many memories. Jacques was such a sweet guy who was so easy to like. I was just remembering when he came to play soccer at a Francophone centre event and he scored a goal I can remember more than a decade later.

Jacques I trust you are at peace now. I wish we could tell you now how much we love you.
Matt



Jacques at Romero House party

2023 Romero Camp Reflection

NÉRIS CORTEZ DE SAINS

Romero House Former Resident

The camp in which I participated on August 4 of this year, referring to such a beautiful camp, I have to report that there are few words to describe the experience, I am simply going to say that it gave an extraordinary change to my life, how grateful I am with God and with the Romero House, who gave me the great opportunity to be in it.....

The mere fact of waking up to see that beautiful sunrise 🌅 to be able to go to the lake and breathe that pure air, bathe in its rich waters, sail 🛶 in a kayak or boat, fishing with family and friends, attending bonfires together, enjoying different cuisine every day. Being able to forget about everything technological to be able to perceive every detail of the beautiful nature that surrounds Canada 🇨🇦 beautiful country, I am very grateful for such a beautiful walk 🚶❤️❤️❤️ immensely grateful to Romero House and all the staff who made it possible.

My Favourite Things

RUTH MACLEOD

Camp Director

Campfires and crokinole and running with the little tots...

Fishing and swimming and after-dark walkabouts... Romero's Got Talent and the cooks' fabulous cuisine, These are a few of my camp Favourite things. Club Romero, and doing dishes! and fishes, so many fishes...

Our day trip to Bridal Veil Falls, which fulfilled so many wishes, Beautiful sunrise, and the night moon over the lake, These are a few of my camp Favourite things. When the rain comes, When the clouds cover, When the mosquito's bite..

I simply remember these camp Favourite things, And know everything will be Alright. Thanks to everyone who came to Romero Camp 2023 and made it such a memorable experience.

ANTHONY, AGE 9

Romero House Former Resident

For Romero house: Thank you for inviting my family to this trip. It's been an amazing time and we thank you for that a lot.

Guidei, Angela, Rodolfo, Anyela and Dionicio for the amazing food, Father Jack and Mary Jo, and Ruth for leading the camp. We also thank Paul for keeping this beautiful land as a safe and clean environment. Thank you Robbie for leading soccer, thank you Marisol and Sarah for the great ideas, thank you Sonya and Sarah for the songs, and Francesca and Sonya for leading the kids program.

Thank you for everything that they have done to make this trip the best. It will never be forgotten. Only God knows what's next and we can't wait to see what the future holds.



SOCCER UNITES COMMUNITIES AND SHOWCASES SPORTSMANSHIP

MERVENDRA NAIDU
Romero House Former Resident

AN EXCITING COMPETITION:

The tournament featured matches between Romero House, People's Church, Sojourn House, Christie Refugee Welcome Centre, FCJ Refugee Centre, Adam House, and Matthew House. Each team had passionate supporters, proudly donning their respective house colors and mascots, adding to the vibrant atmosphere. As the games progressed, the intensity and excitement mounted, particularly during the semi-finals.

AN UNFORGETTABLE FINAL:

Romero versed Sojourn in the finals and was fiercely contested, with both teams displaying remarkable skill and technique. The tension reached its peak as the match ended in a draw, necessitating a penalty shootout.

The penalty shootout was a spectacle to behold, as both teams matched each other shot-for-shot for three rounds. The excitement grew further when the goalkeepers themselves stepped up to take penalties. Ultimately, Sojourn House emerged as the victors, securing the trophy, though many felt that Romero House demonstrated exceptional sportsmanship throughout the game and deserved the title.

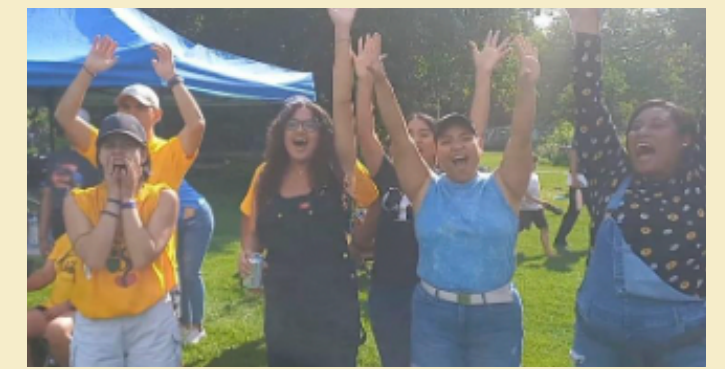


THE SENSE OF COMMUNITY:

Beyond the competitive spirit and skills on display, the soccer tournament fostered a sense of togetherness and camaraderie. The event brought people from diverse backgrounds together, allowing them to forge new friendships. Additionally, the hospitality shown by Adam House, who provided delicious refreshments during the breaks, added to the overall joy of the day.

CONCLUSION:

Attending the soccer game with my sons was a wonderful experience that reminded me of the power of sports to unite communities. Despite the controversial moments, the event showcased the passion, skill, and sportsmanship of the players. It was heartwarming to witness people from different walks of life coming together for a shared love of soccer. Truly, this day will be etched in our memories as a celebration of unity and friendly competition.



SUPPORT OUR WORK!

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We accept donations of stocks and securities. Click [here](#) to donate.

DONATE 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.



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