

Word Count: 601

## Small Groups, Huge Impacts

Imagine your family separated by war. You, your spouse and children have finally been welcomed by a safe country a world away, but your adult children are left behind, still waiting. As are your parents, sisters, brothers, aunties, uncles, maybe your grandparents. People whom you love, who have been your community and your support system your entire life. Your family has had the tenacity and courage to navigate a war zone but the anguish is not over.

This is reality for most refugee families in Canada, including the Cowichan Valley. Few have been reunited with family members. Those who have, were assisted by sponsorship groups—local people with big hearts. When refugees settle in a new country it is not just a new location, it is an entire world of difference: language, culture, climate, employment, politics, economics, food, an infinite list. And managing these differences may be in addition to overcoming trauma from violence and loss.

Sponsorship groups are invaluable. They assist people to live fully again, to be part of the community, and to contribute their skills and talents. Sponsorship groups epitomize “Many hands make light work.” As a group, sponsors plan and execute the necessary fundraising activities, such as cultural dinners, garden tours, trivia night, paint night, GoFundMe page, or garage sales. The local refugee families help wherever they can, such as cooking for events, and inviting friends, neighbours and employers to the fundraisers. The families often accompany sponsorship group members to co-facilitate presentations at service clubs and agency meetings.

Studies show that when refugees are reunited with family members the ease of settling in and contributing to the new community increases exponentially. Besides initial fundraising, a sponsorship group is required to provide the family with one year of settlement assistance in the form of:

- Greeting newcomers at airport and/or locally; orient to new surroundings
- Emotional/moral support
- Sourcing housing, clothing, furniture, household goods, etc.
- Food (having staples ready upon arrival/shopping)
- Transportation (orient to public transit/assist in obtaining driver’s license)
- Language Support
- Schooling (register/introductions/purchase materials)
- Childcare (finding, registering, etc.)

Being part of a sponsorship group is a one-year commitment and is carried out hand-in-hand with the new family’s local relatives and the Cowichan Intercultural Society (CIS).

A sponsorship group works together to plan and brainstorm activities, generally with individual members choosing tasks that suit their schedules, interests and skills (finances, coordination of

events, shopping, research, website, social media, etc.) right down to making welcome signs for the airport. This wide range of responsibilities makes a sponsorship group ideal for Cowichan Valley parents to undertake with their children– volunteering together amid a new culture is exciting!

The Cowichan Valley Intercultural Society will assist pre-arrival with checking documentation; submitting applications; holding funds in trust; and acting as main contact with IRCC (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada).

The impact of family reunification on even one family is infinite–becoming part of a sponsorship group changes everything. In the words of Cowichan Valley locals who are either in or have been in a sponsorship group:

- “It was one of the most worthwhile things I’ve ever done.” (KH)
- “In the face of huge numbers of displaced people, we can help people feel empowered again.” (LW)
- “The warmth and compassion of my fellow Canadians as we take care of each other is particularly moving.” (RM)
- “It’s a privilege to be part of a sponsorship group.” (MR)

If you are interested in becoming part of a sponsorship group or want to learn more, please contact:

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