Creating Refuge
One sponsor’s reflections on the lessons learned from a refugee family

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In 2019, when members of the Gustavson community came together to sponsor a refugee family, we had no idea what to expect or what it would actually entail. But a year later, as we had our final sponsorship meeting in September 2020, our hearts were full and the sense of accomplishment we all experienced was unparalleled. Here is an account of how it all started and unfolded.

Over the past couple of years, the conversations along the hallways at the business school invariably ended up being about our anger and frustration as doors around the world closed to immigrants. Who could forget the image of little Aylan Kurdi lying face down on a beach in Turkey, after the boat carrying him and his family capsized while they tried to flee to a better life in Greece? This image hit us hard. On World Refugee day 2019, my husband, Sudhir Nair, who is also a member of Gustavson, approached the Intercultural Association of Greater Victoria (ICA) about sponsoring a refugee family through the Blended Visa Office-Referred program (BVOR). It became clear that this was not something we could do on our own, so we opened the conversation to include our Gustavson colleagues. The response from staff and faculty was overwhelming, and with this support we decided to take on the added challenge of sponsoring a larger family.

Our first challenge was raising funds, but within days of the discussion at Gustavson, a fundraising team was set up, spearheaded by BCom team members Kate Donovan and Audrey Audobert. From concerts to funded challenges (ask Steve Tax and Chris Graham sometime about their wardrobe sacrifices), bake sales (courtesy of bakers extraordinaire Mia Maki and Heather Ranson) and several generous private donations, we raised enough funds to be able to sponsor a family of six.

As we moved into fall, the clock was ticking to find a home for the family and furnish it before they arrived. Further tireless work ensued, put in by Stacey Fitzsimmons and Ricardo Flores, and we found a home that was just right for the family’s needs. Heather Ranson and her team of handy organizers (special mention to Brock and Claudia Smith) worked around the clock to furnish the home in time for the family.

Finally, on October 4, 2019, the family—comprising a single mother and her five children—arrived in Victoria, BC. They are of Somali origin and had been living in a refugee camp in Kenya for the preceding seven years. From that day until now, a year later, there have been challenges and accomplishments that the family has handled with resilience and grace. From having to move apartments because their building had earthquake safety issues, to difficulties stemming from the COVID-19 crisis, plus the expected challenges of navigating bureaucracy, innumerable appointments, new schools and making connections in a new place, the family and the Gustavson community have worked together to tackle obstacles. Special thanks to Saul Klein, Dave Tommasi, Basa Fadala, Jen Baggs, Stacey Fitzsimmons, Sheryl Zornes, Carmen Galang, Krista Boshnert, Chris Graham, Sara Elias, Jun Sughianti, Ricardo Flores, Jane Collins, Adel Guitonni, Neil Fleischmann, Steve Tax and Shawn Tripp—as well as their numerous family members and friends—for their endless support with these tasks. It is hard to name everyone here, but every little contribution, whether in kind or time spent, was invaluable to the family.

Today, the family members are permanent residents of Canada, having gone from living in a camp in Kenya last year at this time, to living safely in Victoria today. Perhaps one day they will choose to tell their story. For my family and I, the experience has taught us lessons in resilience and grit. As for the Gustavson community, it speaks volumes of how we live our values: People / Purpose / Passion / Adventure.