**REFUGEE RESPONSE MINISTRY**

**Refugee Resettlement Wisdom**

*St. Columba’s has had an experienced and generous-hearted ally as we have planned for the arrival of our refugee family this fall. The Chevy Chase Presbyterian Church (CCPC) has been sponsoring a Syrian family since March, and its Refugee Resettlement Task Force leaders have been our ongoing advisors. The CCPC-sponsored family–a mother, father and children ages 4 and 6–is living in Silver Spring and progressing well in meeting the complicated challenges of building a new life in a different culture. The following is an interview by St. C’s Refugee Response member Lois Herrmann with Merritt Groeschel, chair of the CCPC Task Force.*   
 **LH: What roles have members of your congregation played in sponsoring your refugee family?**

**MG**: People have been involved at different levels and at different times. Everyone has a different comfort level and some prefer to be behind the scenes. A few parishioners were planners from the beginning; undertaking publicity, fundraising, and the household goods drive. Others drove the family to and from appointments. Four church members organized English tutoring for the family. Some came to meetings to help figure out the best way to solve problems.   
  
 Help often came unbidden. A church member came to a meeting, learned that one of the children had a dental problem, and called her dentist who promptly donated his services. A retired member is helping the family fill out their taxes. Others have hired the father to do odd jobs both before and after he got his full-time job as a landscaper.  
 Church members attended a recent potluck dinner for the family at CCPC. The family wanted to share their story with our congregation so together we planned an open forum.   
  
**LH:** **How did you involve the children of your church**?   
**MG**: Children created drawings with the hashtag, “We Choose Welcome” that we used to decorate the walls in the family’s temporary housing when they first arrived. The youngest child attends CCPC’s preschool and church members hosted play dates for the children.   
  
**LH: What have been the most rewarding aspects of sponsoring your family?   
MG:** The project has re-energized many church members and strengthened the church and its relationships with the preschool and the community. It has brought together members with different interests–including international affairs, overseas missions and homeless issues. One person joined the refugee task force before joining CCPC.   
 Personally, I am surprised daily by how much my own family has in common with this family. Our families have become close friends. It has been eye-opening for my children. One of my sons asked, “When are they going back to their house?” He also said, “How can there be a war going on we didn’t know about? Why didn’t we learn about this in school?”   
  
**LH: What has surprised you most?   
MG**: I am impressed by how much the family has adapted over just a few months. Initially we assumed they would want to be with others from a similar national background. But just because people come from the same country doesn’t necessarily mean they have things in common.  
  
**LH:** What have been the hardest things for your family in building their new life here?   
 **MG:** Definitely homesickness. In Syria they lived together in a big extended family–now they just have themselves. Also, the cultural differences are challenging; it is a big learning experience. Learning English with its different alphabet is hard. The Mom is taking English classes, but the Dad is working most of the time.   
  
**LH: What is your chief advice for St. C’s as we embark on our refugee sponsorship?   
  
MG:** Don’t decide how to solve a problem for the family–discuss it with them. Often we think we know the best way to help them–but when we talk to them we find they have a different and valid perspective. Listen to the family, involve them in decision-making, and let them decide things for themselves. Our biggest difficulty has been that different personalities in the church sometimes have different ideas from the family about how to do things. Balancing that is a challenge.   
 Many people view sponsorship as a huge commitment that requires lots of resources. For us, it is not about numbers of people and large amounts of money. It is about the dedication of a few people–with help in small ways from many others. Many hands and hearts are needed at St. C’s for this all-parish project. Find your calling at: tinyurl.com/StCRefugeeResponseSignup.

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