TEAM SYRIA: THE RIPPLE EFFECT OF UNIVERSITY-COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

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This article locates the humanitarian settlement work happening in Antigonish, Nova Scotia to trends across the country: universities and community groups creating partnerships to fundraise, sponsor and settle Syrian refugee families. Individuals from diverse backgrounds and institutional affiliations collaborated to sponsor and welcome several Syrian families.

Cet article inscrit le travail d'établissement humanitaire à Antigonish, en Nouvelle-Écosse, dans le mouvement observé à l'échelle du pays, c'est-à-dire des universités et groupes communautaires créant des partenariats pour accueillir, parrainer et établir des familles de réfugiés syriens. Des personnes de divers horizons et affiliations institutionnelles ont collaboré pour parrainer et accueillir plusieurs familles syriennes.

Canadians touched by the tragic story of Alan Kurdi sought ways to bring Syrian refugees to Canada. Universities became major players in this humanitarian effort (*University Affairs*, 2015). Ryerson University established 25 sponsorship teams, each setting out to raise $27,000 to sponsor a Syrian refugee family; the University of Toronto, York, and OCAD together set out to fundraise for 75 families; other universities offered assistance through tuition waivers, student awards, and bursaries. This article focuses on one small but significant campaign at St. Francis Xavier University, located in the town of Antigonish, Nova Scotia. The campaign, called *StFX for SAFE* (SAFE being the name of a local settlement society: Syria-Antigonish Families Embrace), set out to raise $100,000 specifically for sponsorship of Syrian refugee families. In the community, three separate sponsorship societies were fundraising to sponsor Syrian refugees: Tri-HEART Society (representing three rural parishes), C.A.R.E., *Canadians Accepting Refugees Everywhere* (St. Ninian's Parish), and SAFE. Thanks to the federal government initiative under the leadership of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, three Syrian families arrived in Antigonish town and county in January and February of 2016, four families have since arrived, and applications for two families are underway. We think it remarkable that Antigonish county, with a primarily rural population of under 20,000, plus 4500 students who arrive each September, raised enough money to sponsor nine families. We explore the significance of this university-community partnership, and argue that its replication in other communities in Canada is to be lauded.

In May 2015, SAFE was established by a small group of community members, and their fundraising efforts were quite visible through the local press. When the academic year started, a few faculty members at St. Francis Xavier University worked with the Students' Union, three employee unions, the Association of University Teachers, and senior administrators on a motion to create *StFX for SAFE*. It passed unanimously and the goal of raising $100,000 was confirmed as an "*all Xaverian*" campaign: students, staff, alumni, faculty would raise sponsorship money for SAFE.

This humanitarian crisis brought Xaverians and community members together in a spirit of social cooperation. University President Dr. Kent MacDonald invited the first Syrian refugee to arrive in Antigonish, a (then) 23 year old former medical student, to speak at the President's Colloquium, entitled: *A people in crisis: What can we do?* Well, it turns out Xaverian can do a lot! Quite spontaneously they held bake sales and barbeques, dodgeball tournaments and square dances, book sales and concerts, to name just a few examples. Individuals gave private donations and unions gave generously. Students established the *StFX for SAFE Society*, and with collaboration from staff, faculty, and alumni, organized a community *Peace for Syria* walk, two *Pause for the Cause* campaigns, and *Hair/ Peace Today*, *Gone Tomorrow*, which paired a haircutting fundraiser with a moving autobiographical play co-authored by a StFX alumnus and the 21 year old Syrian youth who performed the play. $100,000 was raised in 18 months.

The diversity of engagement went beyond fundraising to include education through newsletters, interviews with the media, and engagement with younger students in grade school on. Two film festivals featured documentaries on the Syrian conflict and students invited speakers to coffee houses. Beyond the usual and necessary EAL (English as an Alternative Language) instruction, outreach with the new families included swimming and music lessons, tobogganing trips, skating, community teas, and much else. Behind the scenes, Xaverians were serving as translators, writing sponsorship applications, and consulting with government officials. A McGill University medical student who chose to do her internship on Immigrant Support with the Antigonish Women's Resource Centre completed a Needs Assessment for resettling Syrian refugees in Antigonish. Her work included collaborating with community members to organize the first ever public Eid celebration. A fourth year student applied for and won the Ocean Path Fellowship to research employment integration of Syrian refugees, and finds herself immersed in the rich settlement community. A StFX alumnus and a local, retired theatre professional worked with a 21-year-old student who used theatre to tell his story of narrowly escaping Syria with his family (Girvan, 2017).

What did we learn from this, and can we generalize from what happened here to other locations in Canada? We learned that when a university is integrated into a community, strong creative partnerships will emerge to achieve common goals. Like the settlement societies we collaborate with, these partnerships are multi-generational and they connect people with diverse backgrounds. An especially touching example of community spirit comes from an 82-year-old alumna (who donated a woven scarf for a draw) who wrote to us:

> Organizers, volunteers, donors: we are all part of "Team Syria." We all do our part according to our skills, interests, time available—all are equally important. Like a pebble causing widening ripples in the water, I hope the scarf will be the catalyst that spurs StFX family and friends to buy tickets and donate to this very important cause. We must continue the Xaverian spirit of helping others.

StFX for SAFE is now the pebble causing widening ripples. In September, the *StFX for SAFE Society* decided to raise $50,000 by graduation day to establish a Student Refugee Bursary Endowment. We applaud the humanitarian activism on campuses across the country, and we are proud that our collective efforts have helped to settle several Syrian refugee families into our welcoming community. We give the closing sentiment to the President of the *StFX for SAFE Society*, Kristian Rasenberg: "Never doubt that every kind gesture, big or small, builds lives." (News at X, 2017).

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