

# A Unique Experience: MCC and Refugee Co-ordination, 1979-1988

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In April 1979, David P. Neufeld, Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) Canada board member and pastor of my church in Abbotsford, announced that our church was applying for a refugee family and that someone was required to co-ordinate the preparations for and care of the family. I was not afraid of other cultures. From childhood I had befriended persons of other cultures. In addition, at the height of the civil rights movement in the 1960's my husband, Walter, and I were the only white students on an African American campus in Atlanta, Georgia, where Walter was an exchange student. In addition I had married into a culture different from mine, that of the German-speaking Mennonites. I grabbed at the opportunity to befriend yet another culture and offered to do the job not dreaming what it would lead me to.

I learned the "ins and outs" very quickly as the family of eight arrived two weeks later on May 10, 1979. They were the first privately sponsored family to arrive in Abbotsford. The learning curve was steep for me and for my helpers and for the newly-arrived family as there really was not any helpful information for the task. The Immigration office, a Vietnamese lady from the area and Pastor Stephen Lee were all godsend in those first few days.

I began assisting other churches as they planned to apply for sponsorship. When the MCC, BC staff position for co-ordinator of the refugee program was advertised in September 1979, David P. Neufeld encouraged me to apply. I did so, and was hired. Much of my time in this position was spent promoting the sponsorship program. The screening of potential sponsors was very important as I cared deeply what their motive for sponsorship was, and yes, I rejected some as sponsors. We had numerous sponsorship orientation meetings. Liaising with the ministry of Immigration and the ministry of Health was constant.

Visitation and problem solving were priorities. Having an advocate was helpful for those who did not want to deal directly with their sponsor when problems or questions arose. Socializing was always a highlight and we had large gatherings for fun and for information

sharing. Old and new friends met and the entertainers were able to take the stage. It was wonderful. Two days of each week were spent visiting families with their sponsor present. I had outstanding interpreters with me for this pleasant task. On these visits we faced many challenges. We often found a people facing the trauma of displacement, stress of being moved around, ill health, the limbo of having been homeless and stateless. Uncertainty was written all over their faces and bodies during the first few days after arrival.

When we first began our visits the men met us at the door and the women peeked around the doorframe. We very quickly insisted that the women were part of the visits, and they immediately responded by joining us. It was so gratifying to see the women blossom and in fact take much of the leadership in so many areas of life, behaviour which I believe was not foreign to them.

There were times when the refugees needed to complain, as there were times when the sponsors needed to adjust their relationship and expectations. I also learned that the refugee can dislike you, but smile politely, rather than create a scene. Some of our Western ideas and practices and expectations were asinine to them and despite their circumstances in life they maintained a buoyancy of life. After losing so much they appreciated life in a different way.

It was important for me to visit all MCC sponsored refugees to be certain that all was going well. With my interpreters, I visited our sponsors in BC's Lower Mainland, Vancouver Island, the BC Interior and Northern BC.

On these many visits great friendships were begun and continue today. From these encounters I also learned their varied stories. After the war in Vietnam life changed drastically for many of its people, Chinese folk in particular. We quickly learned that Laos was also having difficulties and that we would be receiving refugees from there also. Re-education camps and new economic zones were a reality. Religious activity was threatened. Economics was also a push factor. Seeking a better way of life was attractive, as well as adventurous. Some came because of persecution. Did it matter to the sponsor why they came? No, we accepted them all with open arms and a sense of adventure.

An example of a family who came because of a well founded fear of persecution was the H family. Mr. H was released from prison and told to leave Vietnam, or go to re-education camp. He came with his family of ten children, some married with children others single, some were university students, some teenagers, and there was a grandmother, 31 persons in all. During their escape the two sons, university students had become separated from the family. After a few months in camp in Malaysia the two arrived in Abbotsford, the first government-sponsored persons to come. Meanwhile the remainder

of the family, along with their shipmates were robbed at sea of their gold and possessions by pirates. The boat was swamped and sinking when a passing ship heard their cries for help and rescued them, taking them to Malaysia. The sons in Canada thought their family was lost at sea, but eight months later they regained contact and came to MCC to request sponsorship. Because of the size of the family five different churches sponsored units of the family. It was a glorious day when four months later on May 10, 1980, one year exactly after the boys arrived, the family was reunited.

Within a short time eight more members of the extended family arrived bringing the total to thirty nine persons. However, two very important family members remained in camp, the grandmother who was rejected for health reasons and an adult grandson who remained with her. There were many visits with the family regarding the grandmother, one time with Mr. H on bended knee pleading with me to get her here. On the day that she arrived I took her a yellow rose. The family was overwhelmed with joy at her arrival and so was I. Other family members eventually arrived bringing the total to fifty.

This is an amazing family. They never looked back. They studied hard, worked hard, and learned English well. They are active in the business community, in professional work and have a number of mushroom farms. They are active in philanthropic efforts to assist others in need as they were assisted in their own time of need. After their arrival in Canada Mr. and Mrs. H came to my house every Christmas with tea and biscuits and mushrooms to say thank you. In spring 2005 we had the honour of attending a ceremony in Vancouver where one of those first young men in the family to arrive in Canada was honoured as a recipient of an award naming him as a BC New Canadian Entrepreneur for Export.

The refugee sponsorship program brought together communities as only a tragedy can do. Ecumenical, inter church co-operation in the program was very satisfying. Many different denominations and groups took up sponsoring through the MCC program and other agreements. For those who like statistics, MCC BC sponsored 1244 southeast Asian refugees and the bulk of those sponsorships took place in 1979 and 1980. Three churches stand out in my memory as repeatedly sponsoring many families: the Chinese Mennonite Church in Vancouver, and the Ebenezer Mennonite and Central Heights Mennonite Brethren in Abbotsford. But all sponsoring churches were appreciated and did their work out of the goodness of their hearts, and possibly as a way of showing their thankfulness for being accepted into Canada in their own time of need.

The social service agencies in the communities also did a great work in providing services for the new Canadians, and still continue their multicultural work. Our field staff were wonderful and competent.

Jake and Louise Buhler, the Kehlers, Annie Krasker and Henry and Tina Neufeld were indispensable in Thailand as was Art Driedger and Stuart Clark in Winnipeg. Outstanding immigration officers were Adrian French and Tom Steele in Vancouver, Lloyd Axworthy in Ottawa, and Tom Scott and Russ Bleakly in Abbotsford. Sharon Russo a UNHCR staff member in Ottawa was also very helpful. I can only thank them all for making our job in the provinces easier and credible.

There were difficult cases and people here in Canada and in the field worked together to bring the people over. Henry Neufeld in Thailand and I here in BC worked long and hard to reunite two young mentally-handicapped men with their family in Vancouver. When nothing seemed to work CBCs *Fifth Estate* did a television program of the case. The young men soon arrived in Canada and began their difficult transition to a new country. On another occasion two young persons who were deaf sought reunification with their family here in Canada. After many futile tries and visits to the immigration office the sympathetic officer asked me why I kept coming back with the case. I replied that these two young people were intelligent persons with working skills and I felt to reject them was unfair. He agreed with me and we agreed to ask the family to hire a teacher of English sign language and draw up a legal document stating their intent. Off it went to Immigration and within a few months the young persons arrived. They did very well then and now are great citizens!

Overall, those families and individuals sponsored privately and under joint sponsorship have done and continue to do very well. They work in professions, businesses, trades and agriculture. Their children are on honour roles in school. Their lives are stories of hope triumphing over despair. A former immigration officer has said that the coming of the southeast Asia refugees not only brought out the best in Canadians, but also showed that most refugee families are a benefit to the country provided they are given essential help to get them off to a good start.

There were some folks who fell through the cracks. My fourteen years of refugee work were intense, stressful at times, enjoyable, and exciting. My most excellent job! From 1979 until 1988 when I left MCC my life and the life of my husband Walter (Mr. Mabel as he was called by the refugees) was almost completely taken over by former refugees, and we allowed that to happen. Invitations to parties, weddings and dinner were constant. Christmas and other holidays were always busy with folks stopping in to plead with me to get their families to Canada, and to say hello. We never knew what the next day or night would bring.

One night a young mother appeared at our door. She said, "please may I stay at your house tonight – my husband hit me and I will not

allow it. I am angry.” Of course we invited her in and her husband who we thought we knew to be very kind and gentle soon figured out where she and the children would be. He appeared the next day with apologies and off they went home and they are still together twenty years later.

During one night the phone rang with a request that I come and help a young couple decide if the wife was having labour pains, and was it real? How did I know? I had had two C sections without labour pains. Being a nurse in another life I should recognize labour pain. Anyway off to the hospital we went and a lovely baby girl was delivered. I went home, got some sleep and the next day cooked chicken soup to take to the new mother in the hospital, as I did many times for other new mothers.

One day Q, a very energetic woman came to Walter and me with a proposition. She wanted us to join her and her husband in purchasing a ginseng farm in the interior of BC. They didn't have the funds to do it alone, and surely, they thought, we would love to join them. She brought packages of ginseng tea along to prove how it could enhance one's health. Needless to say, we did not become ginseng farmers, and neither did they. We are still good friends and the tea is still in the cupboard, although I agree it is quite good.

Would I do it again? In the same circumstances, yes. Eight years with the MCC refugee program and six years with Canada Immigration and Refugee Board have brought me in contact with a people and culture that I love and admire. I could not have dreamed of a better fourteen years. The friendships continue and yes indeed there is another wedding party to go to in a couple of weeks.

