

Roberta: The house is just, it's like I said, a revolving door but always full of adventure, that door would be always welcoming people.

Yann: A little clapboard house. Not particularly big, but four floors from the basement to the attic. And so it's got a number of rooms, it's a convenient location. So it's not at all a luxurious house, but it's a perfectly decent house and in a nice neighborhood.

Feven: For us, it was like, it's a really nice, big house. I was like, oh my god, this is like problem solving, right? It just everyone now can live like together. And we figure out what we want to do, where we want to go and stuff like that. So, it was like a big relief. It was like a family home.

Meghan: That was a neighbour, a landlord and a tenant, all describing the same house.

And not just any house...

...a house that for the last seven years and today still provides shelter for people who've arrived in a new country after fleeing their home.

I'm Meghan Mast and this is Relief, development and podcast, a production of Mennonite Central Committee.

(MUSIC FADES UP AND THEN DOWN)

Meghan: In Yann Martel's book "The High Mountains of Portugal," he writes...

"Love is a house with many rooms, this room to feed the love, this one to entertain it, this one to clean it, this one to dress it, this one to allow it to rest, and each of these rooms can also just as well be the room for laughing or the room for listening or the room for telling one's secrets or the room for sulking or the room for apologizing or the room for intimate togetherness, and, of course, there are the rooms for the new members of the household. Love is a house in which plumbing brings bubbly new emotions every morning, and sewers flush out disputes, and bright windows open up to admit the fresh air of renewed goodwill. Love is a house with an unshakable foundation and an indestructible roof."

Today, we're bringing you a story about a house. A house that belongs to author Yann Martel and now houses newcomers.

We explore what it takes to sponsor a refugee family.

How it takes a village. A community. A network of people working together, using their strengths. How anyone can get involved with the resources, time or skills they have to offer.

Sometimes, the sponsorship process starts with a family member, working hard to bring their family to safety.

Feven: Okay, my name is Feven Haile Tesfay. And I'm from Eritrea, originally, and I used to live in Kenya as a refugee and then I came to Canada in April 2015.

So, the first thing that I remember was, was it was very cold. And it was like, now that I live in Saskatchewan, I know when it's very, very cold and when it's okay. It was April. So it should've been, it's an okay weather now. But that time my first experience was like, oh my god, it's cold.

Meghan: Feven soon got connected with non-profit organizations and found there was a whole network of people who were helping refugees.

Feven: I came to learn like, oh, actually, there's a huge community that does support newcomers and refugees and stuff. Oh, there is church, actually church to sponsor people to come here, right? They support them. They take them through the settlement process. They help them find a job, they help them find a house. They do a lot of work, there's this huge community that work hard to welcome refugees in as much as they can, right? And then there is nonprofit organizations that also help you. And then I was volunteering in one of the nonprofit organizations that help newcomers to find a job and stuff like that and I got a job there. And then, because of my job, I used to go to meetings and I learned more, like the community work behind welcoming refugees, right? There's a lot happening. There is organizing sponsors, there is a lot of events, fundraising going on. And people volunteer, people give money and people give like, everything, everything they have. They give money, they give time. They volunteer, they give, also like furniture and stuff like that. And then that way, I was like very connected with a lot of community support groups in church, and one of them was MCC.

Meghan: MCC helped Feven connect with a sponsorship group that would bring some of her family to Canada. The first thing that they had to think about was a house.

Feven: They heard about the house on Main Street. It was very helpful, very helpful, because at that time, I was my family, my sisters, they were coming with their kids, both sisters, and my brother and my nephew. So there is no way we could be in one apartment, right? We needed a bigger house. And then yeah, that's how I learned about the house.

Meghan: As I mentioned earlier, the person who provided the house is a name you might recognize.

Yann: My name is Yann Martel, I'm a writer. I live in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan.

Meghan: Yann is maybe best known for his book Life of Pi, which won the Booker prize. He's also written several others including The High Mountains of Portugal and Beatrice and Virgil.

I visited him in his home in Saskatoon. He shared how he decided to gift his house.

Yann: I had a house here in Saskatoon, which I bought with my partner. And we started having children. And eventually the house was too small. And so we moved to a bigger house. And then the question arose is, what to do with that house?

And I thought, instead of just commercializing it and selling it, I was wondering if there's something I could do with it that would contribute to the social good. And a friend of mine said, why do you try to, you know, rent it out cheaply, or give it's use to people who might deserve it? And so this friend eventually recommended that I contact the Mennonite Central Committee because they sponsor refugees, and so I did that. And then it all fell into place quickly. There are refugees who needed a place to stay, I had a place that was a sweet little house.

And so it worked really perfectly. I provided a nest and people could settle there.

And so I was very happy there. And I thought maybe other people would be happy there for a while. And so we, we, we decided to welcome refugees for their first year when they're taken care of by sponsorship group. We thought here, this would be a nice place for them to adjust to Canadian life.

Meghan: The house has hosted newcomers for seven years now—people from Syria, Eritrea, Afghanistan and Sudan.

Yann: You know, it rolls over very nicely. I mean, it's a very well-oiled system. So, the sponsorship group takes care of the family. We're involved to a certain extent, and instance, as the landlord I'm involved in since I have to make sure the house is safe and comfortable for them. So but it worked very well, they were very happy to be there obviously. Some of these people had harrowing lives in refugee camps having to flee their own country. So this is a safe, sweet house in a safe, you know, sweet neighborhood.

Meghan: And why did you decide to do this?

Yann: Well, money isn't everything. I mean, if I'd rented it commercially, I would have had to be a genuine landlord. And I would have paid a lot of that rent in tax and I didn't much didn't, you know...at one point, I just didn't need the money.

So I thought, why don't I...what could I do with the house, you know, everyone needs shelter. And as I said, I wasn't interested in just trying to make money off it. And so I thought, why don't I, who might need it, you know, for cheap. And this was perfect. These people had a rent-free place for a year. And it just felt like I was helping these people become Canadians.

Because I think certainly a democracy, but any society only works if we reach out and are kind to strangers, you know, we have to make do with our families, for better and for worse, and we're sort of, there's a degree of obligation and duty to a family, but families don't operate in isolation. They only operate with other families, which eventually become society. And I think kindness to strangers, to foreigners, to travelers, to people in the street is really important, because that's truly what binds a society together. We can't just be, you know, loving to people we know intimately who owe, was something like our fathers or brothers, you know, our children, we have to reach out to people that are called citizens. And if that works well together, we have a functioning society. And also, it feels good, you know, to be to do something, to do kindness to someone, you know, feels good, it feels like you're connected to what it really means to be human. In a sense, you create stories when you meet people like that you learn about their life, and they learn about you that yours and then you try to create a common story of what it means to be Canadian.

Meghan: We talked about some of Yann's memories of the families over the past seven years. Helping young girls from Afghanistan learn to use the washing machine, learning about new foods and new ingredients. And seeing the children thrive and learn new things.

Yann: So I remember one particularly liked biking, she was very keen to bike as I guess that represented freedom she didn't have in her own country, either because of sexism or just as of safety, but they're very keen on their bikes, and I told them, you know, make sure your bike is not left in the backyard, it'll be stolen, eventually, make sure it's put in the sunroom or somewhere, put it in this in a safe spot. So just seeing these children adapt much quicker, you know, learning English, starting to navigate starting to make connections outside of the home. It was, you know, sweet seeing that, you know, see them you can see them adapting and, you know, getting up to speed.

Meghan: When we first approached Yann, to ask him about being on our podcast, he was hesitant. He didn't want to be centered because sponsoring these families had been such a group effort. In my first

conversation with him, he said, "I just provided the nest." He pointed to the sponsorship group, who he said had done the bulk of the work.

Yann: It was a church, if I remember, well, it was always some Mennonite church group, here there somewhere. They were the, you know, the ones at the front of it. They were all the ones who were, you know, really putting themselves out in a real way. Whether it was providing clothes, furniture, you know, tangible help person to person. But they couldn't do it alone. Supporting them, and because it's very complicated thing bring people from, you know, Syria, Somalia, you know, it's complicated so the MCC were the the backbone of it. And then the sponsoring group were sort of the hands actually doing the work and all together, they work together, and it functioned very, very well. I never had any issue whatsoever.

Meghan: In this case, five families from Hepburn Mennonite Brethren church in Saskatchewan got together to help Feven bring her sister Luam and two children over to Canada.

I spoke with Leanne Thiessen, one of the sponsors at her home.

Leanne: We first got interested in sponsoring a refugee family as a church after someone from MCC had shared just the need for it. We started to discern as a church and the general consensus was yes, we wanted to do this. So, after that a team was formed.

For me personally, I think it was just my heart recognizing the need of so many people and feeling like I had a lot. And we as a family and a church and a community had a lot to share.

Meeting the family for the first time was both exciting and very nerve wracking as we had no idea what to expect.

I remember that whole feeling of being nervous and excited, and just wondering what the future would hold for us and for Luam. We went to the airport, and Feven and John, her brother, and one of their friends were also there to meet Luam and the children.

And as they got off the plane, I remember feeling such a relief for this little family that they were finally safe and sound after such a long wait. They looked a little exhausted and overwhelmed, of course, after their journey. It was in the evening, and had been a very, very long journey for them.

But it was very sweet just witnessing the reunion between the siblings. They hadn't seen each other for years. And so it was kind of neat just sitting back and observing that.

The children were very brave. One was four and one was only one. And I would have thought that the little boy would have been a lot more shy after everything he will have experienced in his little life already. But he was very friendly and just going from their having this feeling of gratitude that they were in a place that was going to be safe.

Meghan: Sponsorship groups are responsible for covering the costs of housing, transportation, food, internet and phone, utilities and any other costs to help the newcomer family get set-up for life in Canada.

Leanne: The sponsorship process was very involved. And it had a lot of legwork beforehand, before the family arrived. So that's where we were very thankful for Feven's experience. She had come herself as a newcomer, she had sponsored family already.

So, she was a huge help. And just knowing all the details that needed to be taken care of. And to be honest, I have a hard time remembering all the little things that had to be done the logistical details beforehand, because some of the other team members were so capable in that area. So, we all took on kind of different roles, and I was more involved after the woman children arrived.

But besides all the paperwork, before the family arrived, we had organized donations for household supplies from the church and community. Everything from kitchen utensils, linens, furniture and food. We got it all settled into the apartment before their arrival with Feven's help.

Throughout the first year, our team was very involved in getting their documentation completed, taxes filed, shopping with them, driving to the many appointments that a newcomer has to go through.

From vaccinations to doctors and dental checkups, trying to make connections with organizations in the city that would be helpful for a newcomer like open door, global gathering place etc.

We helped with resume and job applications, registering the children in school, practical and everyday needs. We tried to provide enriching experiences for Luam and the children, introducing them to Canadian culture and traditions. And we also were very much taken into their family and their culture and traditions. So, we spent lots of time going back and forth.

Meghan: Yeah so what are some of the ways you learned from their culture and the way that they were doing things?

Leanne: Learning from Luam and Feven and their family and their culture was just as enriching for us. We learned to be okay with people doing things differently than what we might do them.

We were invited in to some of their traditions. And so, being willing to an open to learn from them was equally important as us having anything to teach them.

I've seen what resilience and faith look like. Luam has been through incredible hardship. And Luam has a sincere gratitude and gives praise to God for every good thing.

And so that reminds me to be more grateful for the good things in my life. And I've also learned the power of God working through every part of his body. People with different giftings taking care of the many different responsibilities that accompany getting a refugee settled in Canada takes the burden off of just one person.

There would be moments where I was feeling overwhelmed, but then I could remember that God's provided a team of people and all the responsible were not mine.

Meghan: You've answered this in some ways, but just to give you the opportunity in case there's more you wanted want to say, why has this been important to you?

Leanne: Being a part of the experience of sponsoring a refugee family is important. It's enabled me to become aware of the hardships and trials that displaced people undergo. It's given me compassion for others who are newcomers, and all the challenges they face daily, that I've always taken for granted like transportation, language barriers, financial challenges, which all affect the simplest of tasks like grocery shopping.

There's challenges obtaining official documentation, driver's license, health care, dental care, housing, training, employment, education for the children or the adults, daycare. And all of these challenges are still ongoing for Luam. Even after four years of being in Canada.

I've sometimes looked at the challenges that Luam is still facing as she struggles to make a life here in Canada as a newcomer. And I've been overwhelmed with the knowledge that these hardships that she's working at overcoming now do not compare to what she and her family were experiencing before they came to Canada. I actually asked her once, Luam have we made a terrible mistake bringing you here only to struggle in so many ways?

And she quickly reassured me, No, Leanne, we're safe here. We're not hungry, we have freedom. And so again, I realized that I just have no idea of the hardships that she would have experienced.

Meghan: And then this was the surprise question that I told you about earlier...what are some of the favourite memories that you have in Main street house?

Leanne: Some of my favorite memories from visiting the family at the Main Street house are Luam's birthday, she turned 30, July after they moved there, and we had a backyard party for her. And it was just the first time she'd ever had a birthday party.

(Audio from Luam's 30th birthday party---singing happy birthday. And we have to light the candles. And you have to blow out the candles, do you do that? Yeah we do, we do! You do? Awesome.)

Another memory I have, that just warms my heart is sharing their coffee tradition. Their coffee-making takes about three hours. So, it's a very intense process. And yet, or it's a very involved process. It's not intense, it's very relaxed, actually. So you sit around...

(Audio from coffee making ceremony)

...and you visit, and you get your first little cup of coffee, and you visit some more. And while they're making the next batch and then you get your second little cup, and there's three cups that you get. So sharing coffee with them and their family are really good memories.

Meghan: And what has this family come to mean to you?

Leanne: Um, this is the one thing, one of the things that really brings me to tears when I think about because it's hard to put words on...

(Leanne gulps)

Meghan: No problem, take your time.

Leanne: It's hard to put words on how much this family has enriched my life. We opened our hearts and homes to them as a team as a church as a community as a family. And Luam and her other family and siblings opened their home and hearts to us.

They've become like family to us. And even though they're not living in Saskatoon any longer. We stay in touch by texting and phone calls. We stop in to visit whenever we go to Calgary.

They come and spend time at our farm in the summer. The little boy went to soccer camp at our church this past summer. We FaceTime when he needs help with his homework.

They became comfortable here in our home, and joining in whatever activities were going on here in Hepburn and on the farm. And they welcomed us into their traditions and celebrations.

I feel a little bit like an adopted mama to Luam and a grandma to her kids. And I know that this is a relationship that will be lifelong.

Meghan: That's what Feven said too. Did that surprise you or is that...

Leanne: Oh, yeah. I didn't know what to expect, in terms of what kind of relationship we wouldn't be able to foster and grow with Luam and Feven and their family. So, to see what it has become is a huge blessing and surprise. So just something I'm so thankful for.

Meghan: Speaking with Feven, it was clear to me that she feels the same way about Leanne and the other people from her sponsorship group.

Feven: This whole group support was meant for one sister with her two kids. That's what they signed up for. But they supported all of us me, my brother, my nephew, everyone, even my parents, they, they managed to come and visit and stuff like that. So it was like the best time of my life.

And no, I just don't have words. They're amazing. They are amazing. And you know, when you hear sponsors, or people volunteering, helping...if they have work, from Monday to Friday they would come on Saturday, it was just like extra load, extra responsibilities they took and if it's like cold and stuff, they will still come it doesn't matter the weather and stuff. And on top of that they had to drive like 30-40 minutes from Hepburn to Saskatoon. So, they were basically coming all the time checking on us. They might plan to come twice a day and oh, no, you guys now have to come three, four times a day because this happened. We need this paper, we need to go to this clinic. So, they were like basically up for the challenge. But it was really a big challenge.

And I start realizing all this hard work. I'm like, wow.

It's because they were very well organized. They were very hardworking. They were very kind and compassionate people. So, it's not because they had a lot or they had time and stuff like that they actually did it from, by like sacrificing some of their own commitments and by working extra time, extra, you know?

Yeah, I think we're still in touch I don't, I think we'll be always in touch, forever.

That time was like very special to like, I don't know, I learned a lot. It touched my heart and there is no way I could not be connected with them. And yeah, we call each other, we text. They always like, for example, my sister is in Calgary now. Leanne always visits, tries to do something, to come and visit to Calgary in summer. Gloria, like Karen and Neil, they call her, they text her, they check on us. I think we'll always be family. And I want to kind of have like, a very, like, you know, I just like I will have a very good relationship with them forever until we're here.

That's how much it means to me. Even now, I don't like I haven't seen them like in a while. We haven't talked in a while. But they are my family. It's like, I haven't talked to my sisters as well, in a while now, because I'm busy. So it's the same thing. I know, I will talk to them. I know I will get together I know they're in my life forever.

Meghan: Another person that can play a big role in helping the family settle into a new country is a neighbour.

Roberta: My name is Roberta Materie. I've lived next door to a house that Yann Martel generously gives out to refugees. And we became good neighbors. Yeah, it's kinda a revolving door, like okay, we're not traveling much but Yann brings the world to us.

Meghan: Roberta says she didn't get to know Feven and Luam as well because their family was often busy and away, but she does remember forming strong bonds with the first family that was in the house.

Roberta: They're a family from Syria. And I was very curious, like, what is going on next door and kind of looking and they were the sponsors moving stuff in and out and I could peek in like Agnes Kravitz, or whatever off of Bewitched? I was a sneaky neighbor.

And, okay, and I thought, okay, who's here? Now, I can't remember if I knocked on the door, or if their sponsors invited us over, but we went and had tea. It was actually the first day they arrived, I do believe, and they had such a long journey. And Omar, the husband was yawning, and he doesn't speak any English. And I just was like, you must be tired. And he looks at me, and I go, sleepy, sleepy. He goes, yes, very sleepy!

(laughs)

We just kind of watch and everything we said, if you need anything, just do call, or a knock on our door. And that was maybe a mistake. Because sometimes in the early morning, Roberta, come, come, come, I go, what's the matter now? We need to sugar! Okay, sugar. Or they had a problem with the oven or just day to day stuff. And just sitting in the backyard in the summertime, Roberta come, tea tea tea! Okay, so we did and we got to know each other and we would go for walks.

Meghan: I was curious to know, what were some of her favourite memories? She had several...

Roberta: One of my memories was when her brother finally was able to come over. Now they weren't living next door at that time though. But they invited me to go and it was their year up for them to get their Canadian citizenship. And they invited me to that ceremony, that was very moving. And I think the other one was when little Nour was born and oh, oh it was special. I have a picture. She was put under...I'm a lab tech and had worked in the hospital but I'm from old school when they have an incubator and just a light shining down on them, but she was like a little glow worm because they had those little things in the blankets now. She was very sweet, very sweet. Oh, at the mall one time—I'm sorry I'm rattling on! At the mall one time me and Garth took them out and okay they've tried this and you know some kinds of displays I don't how to know lingerie stores...Mohammed go, ah I cannot see I cannot see! the way I looked at oh yeah, I almost went into the store, that is pretty risky. You should not have that in the window.

(laughs)

They brought us a lot of joy, a lot of pleasure, a lot of worry sometimes. But we certainly learned a lot. And I hope we were able to teach them some stuff.

Meghan: Each of these people who's gone through the process of sponsoring and/or supporting and/or housing a refugee family has learned so much. I wanted to pass on some of this wisdom to anyone listening who is considering doing the same. So, I asked Leanne, Feven and Yann what they would say to a community considering sponsoring a refugee family.

Feven: You're starting like fresh, it's like newborn baby, you will take them to school few days until they get comfortable, until they get used to the taking transit or stuff like that, you have to prepare them to get a job because after that one year the financial support will end. So you have to also help them.

With all this, there is also emotional need, the person might have culture shock, they might been through some trauma and stuff like that. There's that part of it too, although they maybe need medical services, like health issues, so you have to do all that.

Realistically assess the situation. And yeah, prepare ahead and talk to like people, people who have done it before. Also have a network of like, as a community try to know the details or try to prepare even if it, What if they asked for dental? What if they needed dental health whether they need it or not? What if they need this so just maybe prepare? Like for all the odds and for all the case that you could think and know where to go ahead of time? If they have kids which school? Yeah, and stuff like that.

Yann: So, I would say to anyone who's thinking of this, if you can, if you have a house a cabin or anything, do it. You are basically assuring is that someone will have a safe place in which to develop and be a good citizen. And it's a lovely thing to do. It's like, you know, growing a garden, you're planting seeds here, and eventually the seeds will grow. And you will have a garden that's blooming. It's exactly like that with people, you give them opportunities, they will take them, you know, these people face formidable challenges, why wouldn't you want to help them, it's a really tangible way to help people.

It's very touching it touches them, and it touches you in return. So I said and you know, in my experience, it works very well. The sponsoring group are there all the time, helping you know transportation, education, clothing, every sort of, and doctor's appointments, they help there. And if you're the one providing the nest, well, all you have to do is look after the nest which you if you're renting it commercially anyway, you'd have to do anyway. And this you're doing it with people for whom you actually the whom you actually care for. So it's a lovely, lovely, I'd encourage people strongly to do this in any way they can.

Leanne: Not every sponsorship experience is going to be necessarily as rich as ours was. Luam was very open and her family open to developing relationship with our team and our families. And so that was just natural for us to feel like we could become a part of her family too. She allowed us to help her in ways that maybe not all newcomers would want or need. And she was open to ongoing communication and relationship that went so much deeper than just logistics.

I would also say even if you don't develop the kind of relationship that we have, you would not regret sponsoring a family.

You're helping that family escape a life that we can't imagine and provide them with a new start in safety and freedom.

I would say don't take it on alone. Having a team was so important to make sure that the responsibilities were spread out. Don't go into it thinking that it's a simple process, you will have to invest time and resources.

Respect where your newcomer is coming from their lives are infinitely more complicated than we can imagine. They're likely dealing with emotional trauma, immense loss, grief, confusion, feelings of overwhelm, frustration at language barriers, economic and financial stress.

So just to be aware of those things that you know, that they have experienced and are going through right now to be sensitive to them.

Don't forget the things we've come to know that are obvious to us that are totally new to them. There's so much new and everything from phone and internet scams and bedbugs and things. Those are things that we experienced having to walk through with them.

And I can't remember if I said just making it your goal to learn from them as well.

One other thing is to not over help. It's important for the newcomer to be able to become independent. And so that first year that we were working with Luam and her family, we were very much involved in their life but it was ready for Luam was ready to move on and become independent and she has done so very well even though it's been hard.

Meghan: That was Feven Tesfay, Yann Martel, Leanne Thiessen and Roberta Matherie.

As Yann writes, love is a house. And that sure seems to apply here.

Sometimes love looks like filling out piles of paperwork.

Late night phone calls and raising money and searching for housing.

All to ensure a refugee family you have never met can have a new home in a safe place.

Sometimes love looks like bringing those newcomers to appointments.

Listening to them as they share trauma.

Sometimes it means being a good neighbour.

Sometimes love looks like giving your home to strangers who are far from theirs.

Whatever you have to give, there's a way you can support newcomers in your community.

Right now MCC in Canada is actively looking for churches and communities interested in sponsoring a refugee family. We're particularly looking for people to sponsor through the BVOR program—which stands for the Blended Visa Office-referred. These are refugees who have been identified as top priority for resettlement.

In the US, MCC provides practical support for arriving newcomers (asylum seekers, immigrants, refugees and other displaced peoples), and we help immigrants navigate the complex U.S. immigration system.

If you're interested in learning more, visit our website.

I'll include more information in the show notes.

This episode of Relief, Development and Podcast was recorded and produced on Treaty 1 territory, the original land of the Anishinaabeg, Cree and Dakota peoples, and the homeland of the Métis Nation.

This episode was produced by me, Meghan Mast. The head producer is Emily Loewen.

Thanks for listening and Merry Christmas.

Take good care. *(MUSIC FADES UP AND THEN DOWN)*

Show notes:

To learn more about MCC's work with refugees and migrants, visit [here](#).

If you're interested in here