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While other countries turn Syrian refugees away, Canadians are taking them home

By Robin Shulman May 5, 2016

In Canada, citizens help Syrian refugees settle in

"For most of us, it wasn't charity — it's more like city-building," one volunteer says.

TORONTO — Amir Al Jabouli leads the way, holding his Samsung phone out into the snowfall with his bare right hand. The instructions the speakerphone emits are barely audible in the whir of the wind. But Amir is focused.

"Turn right in 200 meters," comes the tinny, digitized voice of Arabic Google Maps.

He turns, and so do his wife, Raghda Altellawi, and their daughters, Ghena, 6, and Nagham, 5. The girls, who are wearing snow pants and bulky winter boots for the first time, are struggling to walk. They laugh and grab each other's hands.

They have just come to Canada as refugees from the war in Syria, and this February day is their first day of school. It is not only the girls' first day of school in Canada, but their first ever. Ghena and Nagham were just babies when fighting closed schools in their home town of Homs. After surviving siege, bombardment and Amir's kidnapping, they

fled to Lebanon, where school was out of reach for many Syrians. Now Nagham is starting junior kindergarten and Ghena, first grade. Twenty-two-year-old Raghda and 31-year-old Amir, who left school in seventh and ninth grades, respectively, are starting full-time English classes.

The snow looks beautiful to Amir, a clean white sheet over a dirty world. Every footstep makes a fresh imprint. It's how he feels about all of life in Canada.

"I feel reborn," he has been saying since he landed in Toronto 10 days ago. Of course, there are details to figure out. No one in the family speaks English. They have no jobs. And they know almost no one.

But they do have a network of people poised to help. A group of strangers brought them to Canada, using a private sponsorship process that has become a global model and that some refugee advocates in the United States want to replicate. The program places the power of selecting, financing and resettling refugees in the hands of regular citizens, as long as the refugees clear Canadian government security, background and health checks.

So as Amir and Raghda navigate this new landscape, they are not alone. Amir was able to access Google Maps because his sponsor Ali Khan had set him up with a new phone and data plan. Sponsor Ashley Hilkewich had taken a day off work to take them to an English assessment, and another sponsor had registered the girls in school. For one year, Amir, Raghda and the girls have the support of about 20 Canadian volunteers and 80 donors.

In December, the world saw images of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau welcoming the first planeload of incoming refugees from Syria in the Toronto airport, telling them, "You are home. Welcome home." But as many as 10,000 of the more than 26,000 Syrians who have arrived in Canada so far are being privately sponsored by groups of regular Canadians — a dog-walking group, a book club, a choir, officemates, block associations. Young families offer up basement apartments and retirees donate housewares from the attic. Resettling refugees has become a national project.

"I have absolutely never seen anything like this in my entire career in the public service," says Sarita Bhatla, Canada's director of refugees.

In the United States — which has the largest refugee resettlement program in the world but does not permit private sponsorship — lawmakers and refugee advocates are watching Canada. The U.S. is taking in about 10,000 Syrian refugees this fiscal year, but some say private citizens could do much more. A coalition of organizations led by the libertarian Niskanen Center has been lobbying the White House for executive action to authorize a scaled-back version of private sponsorship. The center proposes that private donors create a fund to cover costs of bringing refugees in excess of the government quotas. There's a precedent. In 1986, President Ronald Reagan began a program that allowed private organizations to resettle 16,000 Soviet Jews and Cubans — but it was not renewed.

Meanwhile, in the borderless era of Facebook fundraising, U.S. citizens interested in sponsoring Syrian refugees have been donating money to Canadian groups. Tens of thousands of Americans have also offered help to U.S. resettlement agencies, the organizations the federal government contracts to help refugees begin new lives. Watching Canada, refugee advocates wonder: What if there was a mechanism to translate these offers of help into direct action? Could the ability of regular people to take action inject goodwill throughout the society?

Instead, they battle a host of anti-refugee measures, inspired by vitriolic political rhetoric and fear that terrorists posing as refugees could sneak into the country. Amir and Raghda's sponsors see their effort as more of an investment than a risk. None have any direct connection to Syria. Many were born in Canada to parents who came from places like Portugal, Hong Kong and Pakistan, under the liberalized immigration policies of Justin Trudeau's father, Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau. In a generation, those policies remade Toronto — once a genteel, strait-laced, Anglophile town — so that half the sprawling, tolerant city is foreign-born. Today, Canada ranks among the best countries in the world for integrating newcomers, according to an annual study of 38 developed nations. That makes sponsors feel helping refugees will benefit Canada. "For most of us, it wasn't charity — it's more like city-building," says Ashley.

"Our group is pretty young, a lot of young professionals downtown," she says. Many, like Amir and Raghda, have young kids, and that will make it easy for the newcomers and the sponsors to connect, Ashley says. But there are differences. Amir is a butcher. Raghda married Amir when she was 14. They are scarred from the war. "The surprise is that they are wonderful people," says Ashley. "They're open, fun people who we would have been friends with in any circumstances."

Ali Khan helps Amir Al Jabouli adjust the fire alarm in Al Jabouli's apartment in Toronto. Amir, wife Raghda Altellawi and their two children have settled in Canada after fleeing the conflict in Syria. Ali is among thousands of Canadians who have banded together to help resettle Syrian refugees. (Nikki Kahn/The Washington Post)

The idea to bring a Syrian family to Canada had taken shape slowly. Thirty-two-year-old Ashley Hilkewich, a nonprofit manager, first brought it up in August. "Then she went quiet," says her husband, Ali Khan, 43 and a director at Sun Life Financial. The timing wasn't great: Their daughter, Aria, was only 18 months old, and Ashley had recently started a new job. Evenings were a dash to get home from work, get dinner on the table and get Aria to sleep. There hardly seemed time to support another family.

Then the body of 3-year-old Alan Kurdi washed up on the shores of Turkey. The image of the Syrian child face-down in the sand, the Velcro still fastened on his tiny shoes, appeared around the world. Soon it emerged that the child's extended family had tried and failed to join relatives in Canada through a stalled private sponsorship, after the policies of former Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper had created delays. That failure cut to a core sense of national identity. Were Canadians a people that responded to the greatest refugee crisis in decades by turning a blind eye? The consensus was: no. In the midst of a federal election campaign, the political parties began outbidding each other over how many Syrians they would admit. Justin Trudeau, a Liberal, came to office promising to work with private sponsors.

Ashley and Ali are practical people, a double MBA household of project managers who set up a daily iPhone alert to get ready for bed. Ashley has pale blue eyes and long blond hair, a solid authoritative beauty. She grew up in small-town Saskatchewan, where her father, an oil-well operations manager, and her mother, an accountant, taught her never to quit: "You don't *try* to do things, you do them." Ali is tall, shaggy-haired, slightly formal, himself an immigrant who grew up in Rawalpindi, Pakistan, where his parents ran a small garment manufacturing company. His mother would talk about helping the impoverished seamstresses who did piecework. It gave him an impulse to "identify the privilege we have and find a way of sharing it."

So in December, when Ali and Ashley's 62-year-old housekeeper mentioned that she was sponsoring a Syrian family with members of her church — and had helped raise $20,000 selling chicken on a bun — Ashley thought, "If she can do this, we can do this."

Ashley worked out the math with her sister, Mallory Hilkewich, a 28-year-old social work student, and Ali. They would need $35,000. How many people would they have to ask to commit $100 a month over 12 months? On Dec. 20, they sent an email to friends. People responded instantly, saying, "Thank you, I was thinking of getting involved, but I didn't know how," says Ali. "This is what I do professionally. I'm a fundraiser," Ashley adds. "I can tell you, people don't usually thank you for asking them for money." By the end of January, they had $50,000.

Any five or more citizens can form a group to bring refugees to Canada. The group must write a settlement plan dozens of pages long, specifying who will perform tasks such as pick the family up at the airport, find a dentist and provide social support. Instead, Ashley chose a less bureaucratic path through Humanity First, a volunteer-run organization that can serve as the official sponsor.

A real estate agent in their group found a basement apartment in a neighborhood of pristine brick houses and high-rise apartments. It was across the street from the Victoria Park subway station, and cheap enough, at about $830 a month, that after the sponsorship year, the family still might be able to afford it.

On Jan. 31, Ashley called the director of Humanity First to say they would be ready for a family by March. He said, “You have housing? We have a family arriving this week!”

“Ashley called me on Sunday at 10:30 at night,” says Janice Sousa, a group member. “She said, ‘Can we get our act together?’ I said, ‘Yeah, we can do it.’ ”

Janice filled an online registry with everything she could imagine a family of four would need to set up house, and she blasted her contacts with requests to donate. “I said, ‘I will drive anywhere in southwestern Ontario to come pick anything up.” She took a day off from work and rented a van to manage a dozen pickups.

The night before Amir and Raghda were scheduled to arrive, eight people gathered to put together their apartment.

What makes a place feel like home? Everyone, it turns out, has a different idea. Janice knew her own parents, Portuguese immigrants, had missed familiar foods. She had heard that cumin is as essential to a Syrian dinner table as salt and pepper, so she went on a mission to find a cumin shaker. Another group member picked up pastel decals of owls for the girls’ bedroom. Mallory helped other sponsors fill a cupboard with coffee mugs and plates.

The homemaking was imperfect. Owls are considered bad luck in Syria. Cumin is well-used, but no one sprinkles it raw on food at the table. Syrians rarely drink coffee or tea from mugs.

And Amir and Raghda had their own ideas about making the apartment homey. In three suitcases, they brought 18 tiny clear glass cups for serving tea — “We like to see the color of the tea,” Amir says. They also brought a pestle, blue plastic children’s plates decorated with cartoon birds, a favorite spice mix and nigella seeds.

Ask them what really provides a sense of home, and they talk about the people they miss. They left almost everything they own behind; they are people who have already decided that home is not located in objects. Still, they appreciate all their sponsors thought to provide. “Without us asking for things, they know what we need,” says Raghda, marveling. Those gestures — the people themselves — give the best approximation of hominess.

Raghda Altellawi and Amir Al Jabouli visit a local supermarket with their sponsor Ali Khan. (Nikki Kahn/The Washington Post)

“I’m nervous,” says Amir on this first day of English class. A lot depends on their school success. Will they learn to communicate enough to make their way in this new place? Will they make good on all their sponsors have invested?

Amir has shepherded his family through three relocations since the war began. Small, handsome and capable, he prides himself on being able to figure things out easily: Even when he doesn’t understand the English all around him, he watches people’s faces and gestures.

Ali often tells Amir and Raghda, through a Google Translate app on his phone, “You’re going to be superstars in Canada.”

But the language gap is hard.

“When I have my family around me, I’m okay,” Amir says. “But when I’m out in the world, something always keeps me apart.”

Early on, Raghda talked about her future with Ashley. She had never imagined she would finish high school, learn a trade or attend university, but Ashley said these things were possible. “She told me I’m young, I can learn, I can work,” says Raghda — as though saying the words made them true. She moves confidently, even through

unfamiliar places, in brightly colored scarves that tightly frame her face. At home, her flowing rust-colored hair and freckles make her look her age — young.
Now she and Amir walk up to the building that houses Danforth Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada building, in a nondescript strip mall by a Tim Hortons coffee shop. She grins and does a little jig as she stomps snow off her boots on the welcome mat.

Her excitement dims as she and Amir wordlessly approach the fluorescent-lit front desk. They have no English words to say. The receptionist asks if they're here to start classes and presents forms to fill out. "Oh, you're brand new!" she says, as Amir and Raghda stare in silence at the Latin letters.

Finally, Amir picks up a pen to fill out his address: "VKTORA PARK," he spells, laboriously, for Victoria Park. Arabic writing does not include most vowels, and he's transliterating the language in his head.

Their new teacher, Catherine Porter, sits them down for a conversational assessment. "Good morning," says Porter, who wears large glasses and carries her keys on a cord around her neck. Raghda says, "Good morning." Then Porter turns to Amir. "How are you?" she asks. Flustered, he repeats just what Raghda said: "Good morning."

Partway through the assessment, Amir furrows his brow and looks away into middle distance, his jaw tightening. Porter gives him an encouraging smile.

"Your English, for my class, is in the middle," she tells them. Suddenly, Amir smiles too. "Good start," she says. "You both have a good start."

At the end of the school day, Amir and Raghda pick up the girls.

Secord Elementary School has a happy, bright energy. Teachers speak with cheerful authority, and children listen. The school gets special funding because of its high poverty rate, and about a third of its students were born outside of Canada. But they attend school alongside plenty of middle-class kids, and the school has a reputation for great teaching. There's a protocol for screening refugees.

"I asked, 'Have you seen war?'" says Jane May, an English-as-a-second-language teacher who did intake when Ghena and Nagham registered, acknowledging that often, the worst does not come out.

In the morning, Raghda and Amir had left Nagham standing alone on the playground while the other junior kindergarten children played together. Nagham — whose entire life has been war and who has rarely been without family — climbed up a ladder all by herself, then slid down a snowy slide.

After school, she throws herself into her mother's arms. "Everyone talked to me in English, and I just answered with nonsense," she reports.

Ghena, on the other hand, had a great day. “My friends brought me presents!” she announces. The teacher had organized the kids to bring welcome gifts.
Nagham looks at her sister, frowning. “No one brought me presents.”

As they pass Dentonia Park on the way home, Raghda sees a six-foot snowman. She runs to wrap her arms around its snowball belly. The girls follow. Then Raghda lies on her back to make a snow angel, and Amir and the girls tumble down into the snow with her.

“I can’t believe I’m actually here,” Raghda says.

Raghda, center, attends an English-language class in Toronto. (Nikki Kahn/The Washington Post)

Amir and Raghda come from Homs, Syria’s third-largest city. Amir grew up in the Old City, in a stone house built hundreds of years ago from the distinctive local black basalt. His father and grandfather were butchers. As a child, the enterprising Amir set up little businesses — he and his older brother Mohanad bought fava beans in bulk and cooked them, or cactus fruits, and cut them up, and sold them on the street in single-serve portions at profit. Amir, who wanted to be just like his father and older brothers, would ask, “Can I go to work with you?” At age 9, he started learning how to break down meat. In grade nine, he left school to work full time as a butcher.

Eventually Amir got a job in the government slaughterhouse where Raghda’s father worked. When he asked about marriage, Raghda was only 14. She prided herself on her independence and felt shy the first time Amir came to meet her. But other girls married

at her age, and they both felt a connection. “I liked him from the first time I saw him,” says Raghda. They got officially engaged. “Then I fell in love with him,” she says. Amir likes to joke, “We got married in a butcher shop!”

After the wedding, they lived with Amir’s family in a modern apartment in the Fairouzeh suburb just southeast of Homs. “They became my second family,” Raghda says of Amir’s parents. “It was one of the things my husband loved about me: I get used to things easily.”

Ghena was born when Raghda was only 15. Then Nagham came just after Raghda’s 17th birthday. And in March 2011, when Nagham was just a few months old, protests began.

“We didn’t go out; we were just watching,” says Amir. “Every week, we said, ‘This week, everything will be sorted out.’” But it wasn’t sorted out. Instead, “the events,” as Raghda and Amir call them, escalated. By the end of April, thousands were protesting in Homs. By May, the army sent tanks. Opposition forces consolidated and fought street battles. The government launched airstrikes. “Is the army bombing us, Mommy?” Ghena would ask.

“I never stopped working,” Amir says. “I knew which way to take to get to work, I knew where there were snipers, I knew how to avoid them.” He would deliver meat with his brother Mohanad in a small white Suzuki truck.

One day, Amir and Mohanad turned a corner and drove right into a phalanx of 60 armed men, part of a pro-government Alawite militia. They shot up the van and held Amir and his brother hostage, Amir says, hoping for an exchange for their own men. “I don’t want to talk about the torture,” Amir says. He went in two months from 150 pounds to 120 pounds. By the time he was freed, says Raghda, “He was skin and bones.”

Others suffered worse. Two of Raghda’s brothers were forced into conscription and one disappeared, she and Amir say; one of Amir’s brothers was killed in a bombing. The Washington Post could not independently confirm their accounts.

Another of Amir’s brothers, Osama, was walking down the street when a mortar shell struck nearby, spewing shrapnel, including a piece that lodged between his tenth and eleventh vertebrae, leaving his lower body paralyzed, Amir says.

Amir’s father urged him to leave the country. Osama had gone to the coastal Lebanese city of Tripoli for medical treatment, and other relatives had followed. Neighbors were clearing out, heading to Jordan and Turkey, and some were attempting the sea passage to Europe. Amir followed their journeys in real time on Facebook and using text messaging on WhatsApp. Some made it. But Amir had no interest in subjecting his family to risky border crossings.

Instead, they moved to the quiet city of Nabek, halfway between Homs and Damascus. Amir got work as a butcher, and they rented a ground-floor apartment — safer, in case of bombing.

After a peaceful year, the war came to Nabek, too.

One day, just before sunset, when relatives were visiting, the Syrian air force launched new strikes. Raghda tried to distract the children with games. Suddenly, a flash as bright as lightning filled the airshaft. There was an enormous boom, the windows shattered, and the foundation of the building shook. “My sister’s kids were so scared, they had diarrhea,” Amir says.

The top floor of the building had been hit.

Soon afterward, they decided to move back to Homs.

“The only thing left standing in Homs when we got back was the sign, ‘Welcome to Homs,’” Amir says wryly. In eerily empty, rubbled streets, war damage had left many buildings as transparent and flimsy as lace. Amir was afraid to leave the house. “My country is a place where you can find bodies in garbage cans,” he says.

“I never in my life imagined leaving Syria,” says Raghda. “But we couldn’t live that way.”

They decided Amir would go alone to Tripoli and test the waters. On his second day, he got a job as a butcher for a new restaurant. In a few weeks, he had money to send for his family.

By the time they arrived, Amir was working seven days a week for 12 or more hours a day, and living with seven relatives in a three-bedroom apartment. Raghda began caring for Osama, Amir’s paralyzed brother. “I was so sad all the time,” she says. Amir had to renew their Lebanese residency visas every six months, until officials refused more renewals. But Amir had to pay for rent, food and Osama’s medication. He worked for months without papers and, several times, he was picked up and thrown in jail. He worried about Raghda and the girls. “He gets scared for me more than for himself, because I’m still young,” Raghda says. “He knows I’m older than my age in years, but he still feels responsible.”

Amir and his brother Akram had both registered their families as refugees with the United Nations and applied to be resettled in Canada. In August 2015, Amir got a phone call requesting a screening interview. Then there were medical checks, background checks and a two-hour interview at the Canadian Embassy. *Where does your sister live? How did she meet her husband? Did you go to demonstrations? Did you ever hold a gun?* Meanwhile, Akram and his family were approved and traveled to Canada in October. Then Amir got word that his family was approved, too.

Late into the night, Amir and Raghda plotted their lives in Canada. “We said as soon as we arrive, we’d start learning English and enroll the girls in school,” Raghda says. “Even if I have to act like I’m deaf and mute and learn the language from the beginning—I can do that,” Amir says.

The Canadian government chartered a bus to bring them and other Syrians from Tripoli to Beirut, then a plane to transport them to Amman, Jordan, and another to Montreal. Finally, Amir, Raghda and the girls boarded a commercial flight to Toronto. The transatlantic flight was crowded with Syrian families. As the plane took off, some official asked if anyone was fearful or anxious, and passed out little pills.

“It knocks you out,” said Raghda, who took one. One woman cried the entire flight. Ghena and Nagham watched cartoons, clutching teddy bears they had carried from Syria. People had only foggy ideas about their new lives. Some said, “We’re going to England, not coming with you”—not realizing their final destination was the mid-sized Canadian city of London. As the plane descended into Montreal at night, Raghda and Amir looked down at their new country and saw a neat grid of glowing orange lights.

Only in the Toronto airport did they learn a group of Canadians was waiting to meet them, that these people were offering a year of financial support, logistical help and friendship. “We were in disbelief,” Amir says.

“It restored my faith in humanity,” says Raghda.

Amir, left, helps himself to dinner at the home of Ali Khan and his wife, Ashley Hilkewich, two of his sponsors. (Nikki Kahn/The Washington Post)

By the end of the first week, Raghda is dominating her English class. “What color is the food?” Porter asks the students, pointing to a picture of an avocado. “Green!”

Raghda calls out. Her amber eyes lock onto the teacher's face. "Oranges: Are they a fruit or a vegetable?" "Fruit!" Raghda answers, as though she's on a game show, racing to hit the buzzer. "Very good, Raghda!" Porter says.

Amir's head is in his hands.

"Let's read it slowly," says Porter.

Amir straightens up and sounds out a new word: *ap-ri-cots*.

At home, after dinner, Nagham and Ghena play in their room on a red-and-white Canadian Red Cross blanket they've fashioned into a carpet over the cold tile floor. Amir unfolds a donated laptop, so he and Raghda can study vegetables in teach-yourself-English videos on YouTube.

The girls are adjusting to their school, too.

There is no ESL for kindergartners. Nagham's classroom is busy, cheerful, packed with activities — but there are only two teachers for 29 children, and everything's in English. Dreamy Nagham drifts around in silence, picking up a marker and scribbling, or grabbing a magnifying glass and peering at the altered world.

Ghena's ESL class, with children from Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Belgium, is small.

"Remember, you guys are the teachers," the teacher Anna Rombough tells the children, directing them to help Ghena pronounce new words. Rombough exudes kindness and speaks slowly, looking for what each child understands. "Elbow," Ghena repeats after a friend. "Eye."

Every evening after Ashley puts Aria to sleep, she gets out her MacBook Pro to do administrative work for Amir and Raghda. She created a Google doc she fills with tasks for the other sponsors: *Get a blender, for Raghda's cooking*. *Find a local Arabic-speaking doctor*. *Get information on accreditation for a halal butcher*. Members of the sponsor group can log in and complete tasks.

Humanity First recommended that only two people be the face of the sponsor group in the early days, so as not to overwhelm the family. Mallory and Ali are each dropping by two evenings a week to see Raghda and Amir and the girls.

There's a bureaucracy to building a new life. Ali takes them to apply for government health insurance cards that Canadians use to get health care. They line up in a government service office in a strip mall, and Ali holds their binder of plastic-pouched documents.

Then they go to the Clothing Drive, a volunteer-run storefront set up so Syrians can "shop" for free from donations. Every week, newcomers empty the place, and every week, a new load of donations comes in.

“Pick out enough things that the girls can wear something different every day at school,” Ali says.

“Is it necessary to change your clothes every day?” Raghda asks, in surprise.

“It’s the culture,” Ali says.

Amir has been avoiding the subway because it’s the one place he can’t use his Arabic-language Google Maps. “When you go underground, you lose reception — that’s scary for me,” he says. But one day, Ali shows him how to read the subway map and listen for the station names. Soon Amir is taking public transportation everywhere.

Almost as soon as they met, Amir told Ali he would return the money the sponsors raised, and he often says that once he’s standing on his own two feet, he will help the group help other Syrians.

Raghda has a more immediate way of showing her gratitude: She cooks and invites Ali, Ashley and Mallory to meals.

One night, Ali drives them to an Arabic grocery store. Raghda smiles as she grabs some fresh grape leaves to stuff with rice and herbs. She laughs at the curly parsley, as though someone styled regular parsley and gave it frills.

They often take pictures on their cell phones of food packages and enter the photos into a translation app. The ingredients instantly appear in Arabic.

But they still make mistakes. Raghda unknowingly purchased French vanilla yogurt for a pasta dish—yuck. Instead of regular flour, she bought corn flour, too dry and course to make her usual flatbread.

Some evenings, Raghda ventures out to the local grocery shop by herself while Amir stays home with the girls. No one looks twice in her direction, and men don’t say a word or make a move. In Lebanon, Amir felt he had to call a driver and have him wait while she shopped, to make sure she was safe. Here, she feels safe all the time.

“We used to hear about freedom a lot, and we never knew what it is,” Amir says, slowly and quietly, enunciating the words carefully in Arabic, as though he had been formulating this thought for some time. “I feel safe, and that makes me feel free. Now I understand what freedom is.”

Nagham Al Jabouli, 5, attends class at Secord Elementary School in Toronto. Until she arrived in Canada, she and her older sister had not been able to go to school of any kind because of the war in Syria and conditions for refugees in Lebanon, where the family lived for a time. (Nikki Kahn/The Washington Post)

Many Canadians see private citizens as more effective at helping refugees integrate than the government. “Instead of one worker helping 20 families, we have 20 families helping just us,” refugees with private sponsors often say. A 2007 Canadian government study found that privately sponsored refugees reported higher rates of satisfaction and integration after six months and after two years than those sponsored by the government. Other data suggests that government-sponsored refugees are roughly twice as likely to end up on public assistance as compared with privately sponsored refugees.

Canada’s private sponsorship program began in 1979, under Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau, and over the course of two years, helped bring 60,000 refugees from Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. These private sponsors helped shift refugee policy, says Naomi Alboim, then the federal official responsible for refugees in Ontario. “They became the champions for refugees coming to this country,” she says.

Today, as private sponsors work to bring Syrians to Canada, the whole society has rallied around them. Air travelers have donated frequent flier miles to pay for refugees’ flights to their new homes from hubs such as Montreal and Toronto. Ikea Canada has

offered free furniture. Over the winter, there were skating parties to help refugees acclimate to the weather and the culture, and now summer camps are offering free spots for Syrian children. Restaurateurs have opened their kitchens to Syrian women to cook and socialize together, using food donated by grocery stores. The Canada Council for the Arts has set up a program to offer refugees free tickets to performances and exhibitions. Major companies, including Ali's employer, Sun Life Financial, have contributed money. Some have expressed concern the Syrians could drain resources and compete for scarce jobs — and others have security concerns. But support is widespread.

In some ways, the United States had a similar starting point last summer, when the death of the toddler Alan Kurdi roused public sympathy for refugees. Settlement agencies were swamped with emails and calls offering help, says Melanie Nezer, the head of the Refugee Council USA, a coalition of refugee advocacy organizations. "We thought, 'How do we harness the interest and get people involved in a more direct way?" Politicians, including Rep. Zoe Lofgren (D-Calif.) and Rep. John Conyers Jr. (D-Mich.), began to talk of creating a mechanism for private sponsorship of refugees as a low-cost way to quickly bring more Syrians.

But then ISIS attacked Paris, killing 130 people. At least one of the perpetrators held a fake Syrian passport that may have been used to enter Europe. Americans' post-9/11 fear honed in on Syrian refugees — even though refugees destined for the United States must wait for security checks that take years, and there are plenty of easier and faster ways to enter the United States.

Days after the Paris attacks, public dialogue turned against refugees. Presidential candidates called them a threat. The House passed a law that would have effectively shut down processing Syrians and Iraqis. Soon more than half of the nation's governors said they opposed resettling refugees in their states. By spring, there were more than a dozen bills moving through state and federal legislatures opposing refugee admissions. There was no obvious path for many who wanted to help Syrians.

Why should the government be able to tell tens of thousands of citizens that they can't help refugees and save lives? asked staff at the Niskanen Center. In March, the center released a report providing a blueprint for a step toward private sponsorship in the United States. Private donors could create a fund to directly pay costs of bringing refugees in excess of the government quotas, the authors wrote. They argued that such a fund could help quantify support for refugees and skirt the political quagmire.

Settlement officials agree that the goodwill of regular people has been invisible in the public dialogue. Many are working to engage citizens more directly in resettlement.

Recently, Bhatla, Canada's refugees director, traveled to Washington to speak with U.S. refugee advocates. They peppered her with questions, she says. "They were asking, 'How can we let people help?' "

Raghda shares a laugh with sponsor Ashley at Riverdale Park East in Toronto. Amir and Raghda's sponsors have also applied to help Amir's disabled brother Osama resettle in Canada, too. (Nikki Kahn/The Washington Post)

In mid-March, Ali sends out an email to the sponsor group announcing the end of Phase 1. Financial planning, banking, housing, Internet, phone, government IDs, doctors, dentists, school admissions and English classes have all been taken care of. "Phase 2 will be English proficiency and social networking," he explains. Volunteers are invited to sign up on Ashley's Google document to take the family on excursions in the city. Incredibly, for the sponsors, all these many, many tasks seem to be helping Raghda and Amir construct new lives. "It's been so easy," Ashley says. "That's what's surprising."

Soon after Raghda and Amir arrived, Ashley Ali, and Mallory submitted an application to sponsor Amir's brother Osama, who was living with other disabled men in an apartment in Tripoli. They also started raising money to sponsor other relatives.

On a warmer day, Ali, Ashley, Mallory, Amir and Raghda take the girls to Riverdale Park, where short yellow grass covers the hills after a winter of snow.

They can see the Toronto skyline, the skinny concrete of the CN Tower poking up like a needle above the office buildings.

Even here, Amir is partway in the Middle East. His phone dings, alerting him to a message on WhatsApp. "Good night," says his brother Mohanad in Jordan. "Good

morning," types Amir, their running joke as they greet each other from time zones across the world.

Nagham and Ghena take off running down a hill toward some reeds, toward the distant city skyline.

Little Aria starts after them. "I go running," she announces, as she trots unsteadily downhill.

"Yeah," Amir tells her, his basic English matched hers. "Go. Run."

"Nagham, Ghena, wait!" Amir calls to his daughters.

The older girls stop halfway down the slope and turn, squinting back, and waiting until Aria catches up.

Amir surveys the scene, a huge grin breaking over his face. Raghda glances over and smiles too.

They are entwining their lives with this other Canadian family, entrusting their daughters to grow up with them. Amir calls again, in English, to all three girls: "Go! Run!"

And the girls run, laughing, their arms open like wings, their hair flying in the breeze.

Robin Shulman is a writer in New York City. This story was reported with the help of a grant from the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting. To comment on this story, email wpmagazine@washpost.com.