



Chris Friesen outside the new Welcome Centre for refugees and new immigrants. (Photo: Martin Dee)

GIMME SHELTER

The Canadian government says it plans to welcome 56,000 refugees by the end of the year. Chris Friesen, BA'88, is at the forefront of a new approach for their successful integration.

BY ROBERTA STALEY

When Chris Friesen arrived in Kenya in 1990, the nation was navigating a bumpy road towards multi-party democracy. New political parties, such as the Forum for the Restoration of Democracy, had been outlawed and its members jailed. Violence gripped the country and many were dying in tribal conflicts.

A recent UBC grad, Friesen had been hired to oversee administration of the Kenyan office of the Windle Charitable Trust, an education NGO that was partnered with the World University Service of Canada's (WUSC) Student Refugee Program. The WUSC initiative helped promising young African students whose lives had been uprooted by conflict to escape their situation and attend a Canadian university or college as refugee students. Tuition would be free and living expenses subsidized. Friesen's responsibilities included organizing candidates' academic records and dossiers and forwarding them to WUSC's Ottawa office, which would coordinate a placement in a Canadian post-secondary institution.

If only it had been that easy.

Alongside the political turmoil, HIV/AIDS was ravaging the population. Although AIDS had been diagnosed among sex workers in the 1980s, Kenya was in a state of denial about the disease; it would be 1999 before the government declared it a national disaster. "It was the beginning of the AIDS pandemic in Kenya and very hush-hush," says Friesen. "I saw, first-hand, students dying of AIDS. I measured coffins and made arrangements to return the remains of victims to their home town."

Students also faced the wrath of the Kenyan government. Some were rounded up and imprisoned without reason. Friesen would find himself at a Kenyan jail, negotiating with officials "to try to extradite our students." Was he ever in danger? "I was pretty naïve," Friesen shrugs.

Friesen returned to Vancouver following two years in Kenya, but never forsook the plight of refugees. He immediately stepped into the position of director of Settlement Services at the Immigrant Services Society of BC (ISSofBC), a role he has held for 24 years. Since last December, he has been overseeing the welcome, homing and care of Syrian refugees.

Friesen is renowned nationally and globally for his advocacy for refugees and immigrants, founding the Canadian Immigrant Settlement Sector Alliance and sitting as its current president. Friesen also embraced an international role in 2013 when he was appointed NGO Focal Point for the Annual Tripartite Consultations on Resettlement in Geneva, Switzerland.

How Friesen became a champion of the world's most vulnerable is motivated, ultimately, by a profound sense of justice. Such idealism took root in early childhood and influenced the trajectory of his UBC undergrad career. He became immersed in student politics, bent on changing the world – or at the very least making improvements. It fuels his current work with refugees, resulting in

the ongoing settlement of 1,800 Syrian refugees into BC, a Herculean task that has involved up to 80 full-time staff coordinating short- and long-term accommodations and arranging dental and medical care for families of up to 13 whose lives have been shattered by the brutal Syrian civil war. (At least another 1,500 or so Syrians will arrive in BC by the end of this year.)

During last year's negotiations with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Canada agreed to take the poorest and most vulnerable among the estimated 4.7 million Syrians housed in refugee camps, rented apartments and even open fields throughout parts of the Middle East and Europe. So far, most of these who've arrived in Canada are families. Many are from Daraa, the so-called cradle of the Syrian revolution. It was here, in March 2011, that students aged 10 to 15 painted anti-government graffiti on walls, triggering a violent crackdown by authorities. "Some are survivors of torture," says Friesen. "We've seen everything imaginable: shrapnel, cancer, kidney dialysis, blindness, deafness, and people in wheelchairs. They have very little English. The daunting challenge is to integrate these newcomers and future Canadian citizens into society."

According to the Department of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship, there are now more than 25,000 Syrian refugees who've arrived in Canada since last November under the Liberal government's \$678-million, six-year plan for refugee resettlement.

Friesen is confident that the path to integration will be slow but steady. He says the Syrians, like the thousands of other refugees he has helped settle in his career, have a remarkable resilience. "They want to contribute to this country – their new home – they are so grateful for the opportunity that they have been provided."

The support from ordinary Canadians has been key in helping Syrians start to feel they have safe haven in a nation that is so different from their own. Canadian generosity was also important to Friesen and his staff during the seven-day work weeks they spent settling the refugees over a period of several months. "What kept myself and my team going was the enormous positive support from the public," he says. "We went from 800 or 900 volunteers to close to 6,000."

The challenge of settling refugees, and helping them find employment, housing, dental and health care as well as counselling to overcome post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), will be eased considerably by the imminent opening of the \$24-million ISSofBC Welcome Centre, a 58,000 square-foot facility at 2610 Victoria Drive, located about a block from the SkyTrain station at Commercial and East Broadway on a parcel of land leased from the city.

While the project has caused Friesen many "grey hairs," it has been "a labour of mostly love." The programs offered will be myriad and include first-stage housing units for newly arrived refugees, ESL classes, a law clinic, youth drop-in, child care and a Vancouver City Savings Credit Union (Vancity) kiosk, among other services. The grand opening is June 25. "It is the first facility of its kind in the world," says Friesen. "We are taking what a refugee or immigrant would need in their first few months in Canada and putting it under one roof to provide enhanced front-end support. It is the creation of a new international model for the integration of refugees."

The new facility has been a long time coming. The current Welcome House has been in operation since 1986 at the same yellow-brick, three-storey building on downtown Drake Street. It is the first port of call for all government-assisted refugees after stepping off a plane at Vancouver International Airport. Smelling vaguely of mould, with overheated offices, low ceilings, flickering neon lighting and laminate flooring, the Drake Street facility has been Friesen's workplace since he was first

hired as the director of Settlement Services in 1992, a position that "brought together so much passion and so many interests" after his two-year stint in Kenya.

Such passions and interests were nurtured in a family where helping others was second nature. Friesen's dad, Harvey, whose Mennonite relatives fled Russia to escape religious persecution, and his mother, Nancy Friesen, were active in the United Church in their home in Ladner, BC, 25 kilometres south of Vancouver. The Friesens were

part of a group that sponsored a family from Vietnam following the Viet Cong's capture of Saigon in 1975. Friesen came to know the family, part of an estimated 800,000 so-called "boat people" who fled the Southeast Asian nation in overcrowded vessels. "The impact of war coming to a small town like Ladner – a very homogenous farming and fishing community – it was an extraordinary experience," Friesen says.

Following graduation from high school, university wasn't a priority and Friesen worked odd jobs, once as a sleeping-car porter for Via Rail Canada. When he finally arrived at UBC as a mature student, he

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Located in East Vancouver, The Welcome Centre is due to open this June. (Photo: Martin Dee)

undertook a double major in history and political science (1988), focusing on international development. It was here he met his future wife, Manuela, a UBC international relations graduate (1987) and TOEFL English prep teacher who moved to Kenya with Friesen to teach English.

Not one to be stuck reading textbooks, Friesen joined UBC's local WUSC committee. He was inspired by history professor Dr. John Conway, whom he considers a mentor. Conway was faculty rep of WUSC and involved in international refugee issues. WUSC, says Friesen, "was right up my alley." One of the main initiatives that Friesen promoted with WUSC was the creation of the Student Refugee Program. It could be funded, Friesen thought, by boosting student fees at UBC by 50 cents a year. A referendum was held and WUSC members promoted the cause by plastering the campus with posters pointing out that Nobel Laureate Albert Einstein was a refugee, having fled Germany's Nazi regime in 1933. Shockingly, the referendum didn't pass. Friesen demanded a recount.

As it turns out, the referendum had indeed passed – by 22 votes. The program endures today and the current fee of \$2.61 supports four new refugee students every year. This past March, students passed another referendum to increase the annual fee to \$5.22, allowing double the number of refugees to attend university. The impetus for the increase came from students' concerns over the ongoing Syrian refugee crisis, Conway says.

Conway, who at 86 is now professor emeritus in UBC's History Department and still stays in touch with his former student, describes Friesen as "generous, very hard working, with great sympathy for those in need." He had these same characteristics when he first joined WUSC, Conway says – traits that helped create long-lasting change at UBC. "It has been 35 years since Chris Friesen initiated this idea – 35 years of supporting refugee students' board and lodging, pocket money, new clothing, books and so forth."

Friesen's determination and drive to help desperate refugees is something that the rest of UBC could aspire to, says Dr. Dan Hiebert, a professor in the Department


of Geography who researches international migration, Canadian immigration policy and national security as it relates to human rights. Hiebert has been involved in informal talks with UBC at the senior administrative level, encouraging the university to undertake a coordinated response to the Syrian refugee crisis by supporting the new programming at the ISSofBC Welcome Centre. Many services at the centre will require highly skilled staff, which could be provided in part by UBC's panoply of expertise from the faculties and departments of dentistry, medicine, social work, law and business, Hiebert says. Psychiatric services, for example, will likely be in high demand. While the Vancouver Association for the Survivors of Torture (VAST) has counsellors, Hiebert expects they will be "enormously stressed" trying to meet all the needs. "No one really knows the extent of the PTSD among the Syrian population, but it's expected to be significant."

It's not just the services and staff that will be stretched. Two other key challenges are housing and language acquisition. The average level of education among the first 17,000 Syrian refugees into Canada is below Grade 9 and Hiebert says the illiteracy rate is unexpectedly high. "It's incredibly difficult to learn a new language when you've never learned the grammatical structure of your own," he says.

Greater Vancouver's housing problems, meanwhile, have become notorious in the past several years. Rental units are not only scarce but expensive – certainly beyond the BC Ministry of Social Development and Social Innovation's shelter assistance rates, which were set in 2007, Hiebert says. For example, the maximum shelter allowance for a family of five is \$750 a month. (The federal government's assistance to refugees is based on existing provincial rates.) Such financial challenges are exacerbated by Ottawa's plan, announced in early March, to force privately sponsored Syrian refugees to repay the cost of their airfare to fly to Canada, Hiebert adds. (Ottawa normally requires refugees to pay the cost of their travel

to Canada but waived that requirement for the government-sponsored Syrian refugees.)

The integration challenges facing Syrians refugees are indeed, as Friesen says, daunting. Yet they pale in comparison to what the Syrians have already endured. So long as British Columbians continue to commit time, services or things like rent subsidies, Friesen is confident that the many hurdles will be overcome. "The principles and values of being a Canadian resurfaced as a result of this bold humanitarian endeavour," he says. Friesen is calling upon Canadians to take an even bolder stance. The government says it plans to welcome nearly 56,000 refugees by the end of 2016, not only Syrians but people from Colombia, Eritrea and the Democratic Republic of Congo. This, however, is a drop in the bucket compared to the 60 million refugees worldwide. Canada should not only provide safe haven to some of these displaced people, says Friesen, but also devise concrete solutions with other countries to address the dire regional security issues that are worsening the refugee disaster.

For the most part, Canada is a land of refugees and immigrants; if we, individually, didn't come here from another country, our recent forebears did. Our collective lineage is drawn from all four corners of the globe, yet these differences are our strength, with many patterns and colours woven into a cultural mosaic that has created one of the most tolerant and generous nations in the world. There are few times in history when the world has been burdened by such a vast number of homeless, destitute and desperate people. For Friesen, it is only Canadian to open our arms to many more of them. "My generation was defined by our experience as children with the Vietnamese boat people. Today's generation will be influenced by Canada's leadership in responding to the Syrian crisis." 

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Syrian and Iraqi refugees line up next to a fence at the Greek-Macedonian border February 27, 2016. REUTERS/Yannis Behrakis as the border crossing is briefly reopened near the Greek village of Idomeni.

