

Sometimes safety has to be second

Badri Dolal remembers the day he left his village in Ethiopia in 1994.

What he recalls most vividly, he says, are the gunshots as he ran for his life.

"Soldiers came to my village and shot anyone they saw," he says quietly. "Especially the young people."

After making his way to a neighbouring country and living at a refugee camp, Dolal explains that he was one of the lucky ones. He made it out of the camp, but many others didn't.

He often wondered about the people left behind and if there was any way he could help them. That's when he decided to create the Canadian Hearts Across Borders Association (CHABA).

IT STARTED IN 2001

Incorporated in 2001, CHABA operates as a sponsorship agreement holder through the Refugees Resettlement Branch of Citizenship and Immigration Canada.

The organization has signed sponsorship agreements with the government of Canada to help support refugees from abroad when they come here.

"In 1998, when we started the Oromian Community Association, we came

together to talk about what we could do. How could we help those left behind? People thought I was crazy. There was no money," he says.

Although Dolal had no money and knew very little English at the time, he knew his experience as a refugee would prove to be a valuable asset in helping others like him.

"Some of our members, like me, were refugees. We know what it takes to survive," he explains.

Using his own money to fund the start-up costs, Dolal was approved to help 30 refugees a year.

He admits that the process of sponsoring a refugee - reviewing the claims, making contact with refugees overseas, checking references, submitting an application and conducting interviews - is time-consuming, mostly because Dolal does this as a volunteer on his days off from his full-time job.

In addition, Dolal picks up sponsored refugees from the airport and brings them



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to his home where they are welcome to stay until they can find their own accommodation.

The stay generally lasts anywhere from a few weeks to a few months. He has even renovated parts of his home, like installing a new shower to accommodate refugee guests.

After arrival, CHABA offers a variety of programs and classes free-of-charge to immigrants and refugees. The immigrant parenting programs, collective kitchen, women's social group, information and translation services are all designed to help ease the transition.

Another key program is the Cultural Survival class, which teaches basic information on topics that range from traffic safety to Canadian law.

"Keep in mind that these people have never seen an oven or a microwave, or used a crosswalk. It's our responsibility to teach them these things and how different life is here," he explains, adding that CHABA's sponsored refugees originate from around the world.

CHABA currently has about eight to 10 core volunteers, but needs more help and funding to continue operating.

"We don't know how long we can push on," says Dolal. "We need more volunteers in many different areas - like office, bookkeeping, helping refugees find jobs, even volunteer co-ordination."

HOPING TO GROW

He hopes to grow the organization and gain additional funding to hire staff so that the organization can serve more refugees.

"It's all about people, nothing else," Dolal says. "When people ask me why I do this, they say it's too much work. I have a young family and it would be nice if I could spend more time with them, but if I had been killed that day, we wouldn't have the opportunity to change people's lives."

For more information about the Canadian Hearts Across Borders Association (CHABA), call Badri Dolal at 780-497-1212 or email chaba.edm@gmail.com.

Over the next four weeks, Volunteer Edmonton will be examining how immigrants in Edmonton are making a huge impact on our communities.

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