

ROMERO HOUSE 2016-2017 ANNUAL REPORT

Celebrating 25 Years of Welcoming



REFLECTING ON OUR WAY OF BEING, 25 YEARS LATER

More than 25 years ago, a small group of deeply committed people gathered together to articulate the vision of Romero House, a community that was just taking shape. They came up with the document that has guided us as a community based in relationship and trust. We read *Our Way of Being* several times a year with each group of interns, and we are always struck by how powerful it is. As we reflected on this statement throughout the 25th anniversary year, we realized that many folk in the Romero House community have never read it. So now we share it with all of you:



Our Way of Being

1. We believe that the refugees who come to Romero House are, in some profound way, our brothers and sisters. Each one has an inherent dignity and is of infinite value. Together we are part of the human family. It is because of this that we have chosen to welcome the stranger who comes to the door of our lives. We want to live in such a way that we who were once strangers may become good neighbours. We want to take to heart Christ's commandment to love our neighbour as ourselves.

At Romero House the living with each other, being with each other as good neighbours, is the kind of relationship that helps us to act for others in a way that is dignifying.

2. We trust in the inner strength and courage of each refugee. We act on the belief that each one of them desires truth and goodness, justice and love. We rely on what is best in them and in ourselves. Thus, we greet refugees with trust rather than with suspicion.

3. We respect the integrity of each refugee. We do not ask them to tell us about themselves except as is necessary in the refugee claimant process. We respect their right to tell us what they want to about their own past. They are under no obligation to trust us. Romero House is one place where they will not be forced to explain themselves.

4. Nevertheless, we are ready to listen to whatever the refugees want to tell us. We will respect their confidence and their right to confidentiality.

5. We have no desire to act as judges with the refugees or with each other. There are so many people and agencies that stand in judgment over human beings in this society. Romero House is a place where we attempt to live and act with a minimum amount of judgment. We realize that refugee claimants are at a very vulnerable point in their lives. They are not always able to respond in ways that they have been able to, or will be able to in the future. Nevertheless, we will not shrink from making judgments if we see that someone is not acting as a good neighbour. We also know that the work at Romero House is demanding and fatiguing, and we try not to judge one another in moments of weakness. We celebrate moments of strength and conviction.

6. We try to do our work for the refugees with as much competence as possible. In this culture, competence is often associated with a high salary. We choose to do the very best job possible, not because we are paid to do so but because human beings deserve nothing less.

There are things that we can and must do for the refugees that they cannot do for themselves when they first arrive. However, it is far more important that in the work that we do with the refugees that we engage in each other's lives as equals. We do not want to walk for the refugees but with them for a little while, so they can eventually walk on their own two feet.

7. We choose to live simply so that things don't get in the way of our relationships with our neighbours.

8. In each situation we ask ourselves "What would a good neighbour do?" "What would be the most loving response?"

9. We want to respect the different religions, cultures and races at Romero House. Indeed, we want to celebrate the possibility of building a community that values differences. We want to include everyone in our universe of care and concern without demanding that they become "like us". As Christians we preach the meaning of the gospel more with our lives than with our words.



LEADERSHIP, STAFF AND INTERNS

After 25 years of deep commitment to living with and walking with refugees, Mary Jo Leddy continues to be a source of wisdom and deep care for the entire Romero House community. Her work on particularly complicated cases, her nurturing of relationships with the neighbourhood and her fundraising efforts are central to our community.

The daily operations of Romero House are overseen by our two gifted administrators: Alexandra Jimenez, the Finance and Administration Manager and Jose Sanchez, the Building and Maintenance Manager. Alexandra and Jose have done a wonderful job at facilitating our relationship with the City of Toronto, which this year included an audit of our policies and procedures by Toronto Social Housing.

The Romero House Board of Directors continues to be a steady support to our community. In addition to monthly board meetings, all of the board members are involved in various aspects of the daily life at Romero House. This includes organizing the marathon, supporting fundraising efforts and hosting refugees in their homes. The hands on engagement of our board members allows them to really understand and hold close Our Way of Being.

We have been blessed with a group of incredibly gifted and committed interns this year. Matt, Brenna, Ellen, Jeff, Dave, You Sung, Fiona, Hannah and Jonathan have shown tremendous hospitality and creativity, particularly as we have navigated the serious housing crisis in the city.

We give thanks for the work of Caitlin Leach as our Volunteer and Programs Manager, a position she held until September. Her work on Romero House communications, the volunteer program and special events, to name only a few, have left a lasting mark on our community. We wish her well as she pursues her legal education at Osgoode Law School.

CONSULTANTS

Barbara Reid continues as our Grant Writing Consultant. Her excellent work this year has enabled us to support our generous interns in the work they do and to remain in a healthy financial position.

Romero House's IT consultant, Berleine Marin, is ever available and has assisted us in trouble shooting daily issues as well as in continually working on our systems to ensure they are efficient and secure. A special thank you to Berleine for his support during the flood in our office (see OPERATIONS section).

RESETTLEMENT

Trends

We have seen an increased number of refugee claimants coming to Romero House seeking support or calling in search of housing, which is in line with the trends that are being reported nationally. The need for refugee protection is an ever present one, and as people find their way to Canada, Romero House continues our commitment to walking alongside them.

Family Reunification

This was an exciting year for family reunification. A number of families that have been separated for prolonged periods of time (one for seven years!) were finally reunited. A few joyful trips to the airport were made. However, there are still so many families that remain separated. There is a continued need for advocacy for family reunification to be a political priority.



Decisions

Below is a snap shot of the decisions that have come through in the past year for residents, former residents, and walk-ins that are being closely companioned by Romero House. What is missing from this report are the dozens of families that have not had hearings scheduled and continue to wait. There have been numerous hearings postponements, largely due to bureaucratic delays. There are also close to 12 families at Romero House that make up the more than 5000 people that are in the “legacy” system—who made their claims before December 2012 and still have not had hearings.

Immigration decisions 2016-2017	Number of families
Positive decisions (includes Refugee Claim, Humanitarian and Compassionate grounds or Pre-Removal Risk Assessment)	8
Negative decisions	1
Permanent residence granted	8

RESIDENTS OF ROMERO HOUSE FOR 2016-2017

Although most of the families here stayed for at least a year, this list includes some families who stayed temporarily in our guest room for longer than one week

Family composition	# of families	# of adults	# of children
Single person	4	4	
Single parent	9	9	25
Two parents	7	14	23
Multi-adult household (no kids)	1	3	
Unaccompanied Minors			
Total	23	30	48
Total # of residents			78

COUNTRIES OF ORIGIN OF ROMERO HOUSE RESIDENTS

Over the course of the year, Romero House has had residents from 15 different countries

Country of Origin	Number of families
Afghanistan	1
Angola	2
Colombia	2
Democratic Republic of the Congo	1
Eritrea	3
Hungary	1
Iran	1
Liberia	1
Nigeria	2
Swaziland	1
Syria	2
Syria/Lebanon	1
Turkey	1
Uganda	1
Venezuela	1

COMMUNITY LIFE – 25TH ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATIONS

Lula Lounge

We kicked off the celebrations for the 25th anniversary at the Lula Lounge in April 2016 with a very successful fundraiser and a rocking' party. Over 200 people attended the event, including a number of current and former residents. We danced the night away to the wonderful music of Nomadica.

Street Party

The partying continued with our annual street party in June, which is a collaborative event with the neighbours around Wanda Road. The neighbours decided the theme of the party would be celebrating 25 years of Romero House in the neighbourhood. They surprised us with a beautiful presentation from an Indigenous dance troupe.



Howcroft Lecture

The annual Howcroft Lecture was a real treat this year. To celebrate our anniversary, we welcomed world renowned Canadian Author Lawrence Hill for his lecture: *Faction: A novelist uses fact and fiction to explore injustice*. The spirit of the night was so positive and the theatre at Bishop Marrocco High School was packed.

25th Anniversary Retreat

The 25th anniversary celebrations concluded with a community retreat in spring 2017. Close to 60 former residents, board members, neighbours, former/current interns and volunteers came together for a weekend of reflection. It was a powerful and deeply meaningful time together as we reflected on Our Way of Being.

ADVOCACY

Canada-USA border: Safe Third Country Agreement

The increase in irregular border crossings from the United States by people intending to make refugee claims in Canada has led Romero House to join voices with many organizations to call on the Canadian Government to end the Safe Third Country Agreement. This bilateral agreement with the United States seriously limits the regular channels for people to enter Canada to seek protection, putting them in situations of great risk.

Housing in Toronto

One of the most serious issues this past year affecting the people we serve was access to housing in Toronto. This includes emergency shelter for recently arrived refugees as well as more long-term housing for families trying to move out of Romero House after one year. Along with a coalition of agencies in Toronto, we engaged in a number of advocacy strategies to the City and the Province regarding access to affordable housing. This particular issue will continue to demand a good deal of our attention in the future.



Detention

We have seen a number of positive changes this year when it comes to our work with the Toronto Immigration Holding Centre. Romero House is no longer running a bi-weekly Moms and Tots program at the detention centre because there are so rarely children housed there. We continue to participate in bi-monthly consultations with the Canada Border Services Agency regarding the quality of life for detainees in Toronto.

OPERATIONS

The Flood

A few weeks before the end of the fiscal year, Romero House was hit with an unexpected flood at the Centre. Affecting three floors of the building, the flood kept us closed for more than two months with clean up and restoration work. We were able to continue much of our work during that time, but were relieved when we were able to open our doors again.

Fundraising

It has been a great year for fundraising. We have been especially thankful to the various groups of people who have taken initiative to organize fundraisers on behalf of Romero House. There have been benefit concerts, silent auctions, birthday dinners and more. These sorts of initiatives are such a gift to Romero House.



LOOKING FORWARD



Legal Aid Ontario

We are entering into a time of uncertainty regarding Legal Aid Ontario funding for refugee/immigration related legal representation. Potential cuts to Legal Aid for refugee claimants would have a devastating impact on access to justice for a huge number of people. Romero House is participating in collaborative advocacy efforts to prevent this from happening.