

Romero House Annual Report 2017–2018

MAY 28, 2018

Written by Jenn McIntyre, Director
ROMERO HOUSE



Romero House 25th Anniversary Retreat

It has been quite the year. The number of refugee claims in Canada rose significantly in 2017, we started a new host program, people we support faced threats of cuts to legal aid support and we had a tremendous group of families living in our community. It was a year of growing deeper as a community—of reflection on our roots and foundations. The image of a flourishing tree was a significant one for us this year, as we have thought a lot about what it meant to grow in healthy soil with a deep rootedness. We will be giving away trees at our upcoming street party, which is a great way to symbolize what we have learned this year.

Community

Community Host Program

Last year, we started a new program to respond to the need for emergency shelter space for refugee families who arrive in Toronto and encounter a lack of city shelter beds. The Community Host Program allows host families to offer rooms in their house for a temporary period of time while refugee families are on the waiting list for city shelters. We have been overwhelmed by the generosity of our neighbours throughout the city in offering hospitality. There are about ten active host homes at the present time and nearly twenty families have been placed with hosts over the course of the past year.



Romero House Camp

Romero House Camp is often the highlight of the calendar year. The 2017 camp session took place in mid-August at the Anishinabe Spiritual Centre in Espanola, Ontario. It included the participation of over half of the Romero House families. It was an extraordinary year for leadership from the families. Each family cooked a meal for the whole group of 44 campers. One family took the lead on planning the children's program, even though it was their first summer at camp. As always, the community returned from camp strengthened and deepened.

Community

Howcroft Lecture

We were honoured to have Marina Nemat, the author of *Prisoner of Tehran*, as our 2018 lecturer at our annual Howcroft event. Marina's talk was inspiring, challenging and well attended by Romero House families and supporters alike.

Intern Pilgrimage to Quebec

The interns started off their year with a very eye-opening pilgrimage to the Eastern Townships in Quebec, where many refugee claimants have been irregularly arriving to Canada. They participated in a "solidarity border" mass that was organized by the Anglican Dioceses of Quebec and Montreal. It was important for the interns to be there to see a bigger picture of the refugee journey in Canada beyond the front door of our Centre.



Romero interns in Hemmingford, QC

Personnel



2017-18 interns with Jenn and Mary Jo

We have been blessed with a tremendous team of staff and interns to serve this community. Our frontline work is all done by a group of young people who have committed a year or two of their lives to very meaningful service. We have appreciated the contribution of **You Sung Chae, Lucas Driediger, Annemie Van Houdt, James Powell, Chelsea Kerremans and Kristen Reilly** as the 2017–2018 interns.

Our two administrators continued to be the quiet backbone of the Romero House operations: **José Sanchez**, our part-time Buildings and Maintenance Administrator, kept our buildings and properties in good shape so we could welcome families with dignity; and **Alexandra Jiménez**, the full-time Administration and Finance Manager, did an excellent job of overseeing our finances as well as our relationship with the City of Toronto.

Mary Jo Leddy, the Founder of Romero House, has had a busy year as the public face of this community. Her classes at Regis College, her many talks and her mentorship and spiritual support of the wider community helped us to maintain a strong foundation and identity.

Personnel

The Romero House **Board of Directors** has directed and supported the work that we have done with much commitment and involvement in the daily life of our community. Sara Guerrero and Claudia Girado joined the board this past year—Sara took on the role of treasurer. Larry Smith served as the President of the board for his third year. As he has recently stepped down from the board, we offer our gratitude to him for his care of Romero House.

Our work is made possible by the efforts of our two dependable consultants: **Barbara Reid** supported the community through grant writing to fund the internship program; and our IT consultant, **Berleine Marin**, made sure that our technology kept working. We had no computer crises this year—a great accomplishment for a small charity!

We are excited to announce that our team will be growing! Romero House has hired an assistant director. **Tembeka Ndlovu** will be starting in this role on May 22, 2018. We look forward to her service to our community.



Romero House board member at Scotiabank Marathon

Resettlement

Refugee Claim Trends

As was likely apparent from reading mainstream media, there was a significant spike in the number of refugee claims made in Canada in 2017. The number of claims was almost double than the year before. The higher number of claims continued into the first quarter of 2018 and do not appear to be slowing down. Many of these claims are being made by people who are crossing over the land border between the United States and Quebec, possibly a reflection of the political situation down south. These higher numbers have certainly been reflected in the numbers of walk-ins that Romero House has seen. Our Centre is typically very full on intake days.

Immigration Decisions

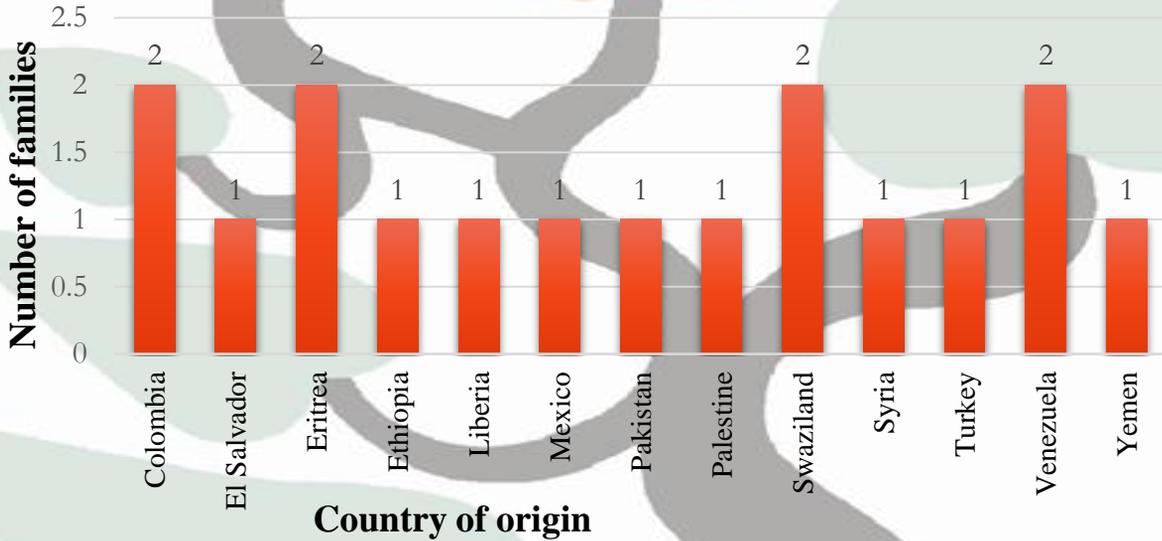
The immigration decisions shown in the table below do not only reflect outcomes for Romero House residents, but also former residents and walk-in families.

Immigration Decisions 2017–2018	Number of Families
Positive decisions (includes refugee claims, Humanitarian and Compassionate Applications and Pre-Removal Risk Assessment Applications)	12
Negative decisions	4
Permanent Residence granted	7

Resettlement

Countries of Origin Table

Often we see the country of origin trends for refugee claims reflected in the families who live at Romero House. This year was a little bit different, as for most of the year, every family was from a different country! It made for a very rich community of diversity.



Romero House Residents



March break kids camp

Resettlement



Family Makeup of Romero House Residents Table

Family Composition	Number of Families	Number of Adults	Number of Children
Single Person	1	1	0
Single Parent	5	5	9
Two Parents	10	20	26
Multi-Adult (No Kids)	1	2	0
Total	17	28	35
Total Number of Residents		63	

Advocacy

Housing

Beyond navigating the refugee determination system, the number one issue that residents of Romero House and walk-ins that we serve face is finding safe and affordable housing. The cost of rent is rising every month and the requirements of landlords are becoming stricter—there are multiple barriers that refugee claimants and newcomers in general face. Lack of credit history and employment are just two examples of the many barriers that people face in securing housing. Alongside the Coalition for Refugee Claimants in Ontario, Romero House has been involved in advocacy at the municipal level to address some of these barriers and to deal with the ever pressing need for emergency shelter.

Legal Aid

Legal Aid Ontario (LAO) certificates are an essential support for refugee claimants who need legal counsel to navigate the very complex refugee system. Due to a LAO funding crisis, Romero House engaged in a strong advocacy campaign in collaboration with a number of other service providers and lawyers' associations. We were extremely relieved that the LAO immigration and refugee program is continuing without any serious cuts.

Operations

We made a number of major repairs and improvements to our various houses to ensure families are welcomed to live in a safe and dignifying environment. This included a new roof on one house, a kitchen renovation in one apartment and a number of smaller projects. Thank you to our maintenance team for a busy year of work.

Looking Forward

Indigenous Relations

As our country considers deeply when it means to live by the recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Romero House is doing the same. We are a community of newcomers that has a responsibility to learn about the first peoples of this place and the land that supports and welcomes us all. We are going to explore this in the coming year with our community in a number of ways, including participating in a KAIROS Blanket Exercise and by connecting with the local indigenous community on Manitoulin Island during Romero House summer camp.

Changes in Refugee Determination System

We are anticipating major changes coming to the Refugee Determination System, including new legislation, in the coming months and years. We will be following developments closely and offering our input and engaging in advocacy where we are called to do so.