

# ‘Alan Kurdi changed the world and saved many lives’

Nicholas Keung

By [Nicholas Keung](#) Immigration reporter

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After Alan Kurdi’s photo flashed around the world in media and social networks, Rod Olson, refugee sponsorship co-ordinator of a Calgary church group, began his workday by opening his inbox — to find some 400 email messages.

“Truly, Sept. 2, 2015 changed my life,” recalled his wife, Joline, a high school teacher. “It asked much of my husband, and indirectly of us, his family. At the same time, it has heaped gift upon gift into his and our lives. It has been a rich, rich year. We, as a family, are learning that life is to be shared.

“Our Syrian Canadian friends have shown us that life is not best done by one person or one family within their own four walls. Life is meant to be shared. In so many ways, everything post-Alan Kurdi Day has been nothing short of remarkable.”

Olson receives frequent emails from around the world from desperate refugees looking for help, many of which he’s unable to get to.

“This takes a toll. Someone said that Rod’s heart is almost too big for this job, but the measure of his kindness and benevolence is what has enabled him to do this,” said Joline, mother of two teenage girls, Anya and Siri.

“I think the settlement agreement holders and their hours of late-night, weekend and serial day meetings are the true heroes in the story of how Canada has welcomed over 30,000 new Canadians since November 2015.”

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Vanig Garabedian was the first Syrian migrant to walk off the first Canadian government-chartered flight in Toronto on Dec. 10. He was greeted by Prime Minister Justin Trudeau.

Gynecologist Vanig Garabedian and his wife, also a doctor, left Aleppo for Lebanon in 2014, after their clinic was bombed, and it was no longer safe for them and their two girls to stay.

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The family was among those who got off the first Canadian-charter flight arriving at the Pearson airport on Dec. 10, personally received by Prime Minister Justin Trudeau.

Garabedian and his wife, Anjilik, sponsored by the Armenian Community Centre, enrolled in enhanced English courses designed for health-care professionals within weeks of their arrival.

Since then, he has made presentations at health conferences in Ottawa and Vancouver on refugee and women’s health issues and is studying for a January medical exam as the first step to returning to his profession. He has also obtained a security guard licence so he can support his family while undergoing the professional licensing process.

“Back home, my daughters were imprisoned between home and school. They couldn’t go out and play. We feel like we were reborn. We are trying to stand up and learn to walk, run and jump again,” said Garabedian, 47.

“It was the nicest surprise that we came to this country and we were welcomed by the head of state. It sent such a strong message to the world that we are not treated like second-class citizens. It gives our dignity and respect back.”

Related: [How Alan Kurdi’s tragic death changed thousands of lives](#)

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From left, Nazim Tejani, Asim Bhatti and Sarfaraz Haq, with Canadian baby Ayman Al Khalaf, met at a prayer drop-in in Richmond Hill and decided to form a group to sponsor a Syrian family of four to Canada.

When Asim Bhatti, Sarfaraz Haq and Nazim Tejani — acquaintances who first met at a Muslim prayer drop-in in Richmond Hill — decided to form a refugee sponsorship group last September, the trio was only planning to bring in a family of six from Homs.

Soon they realized the family also had two “linked” families — the couple’s two adult sons, their wives and children — who were stuck in Lebanon and needed to be resettled together.

At the end, the group — made up of Muslims from multiple ethnicities — sponsored 17 people, including a newborn girl the family named “Canada.” They arranged the sponsorships through the Mennonite Central Committee, under the joint government and private sponsorship stream.

“Seeing Alan Kurdi’s photo was a major catalyst to get us going. I have a grandson who just turned 4 and I couldn’t imagine if that was my grandson,” said Haq, 55, who came here from India three decades ago with just \$25 in his pocket.

Bhatti, 42, who came here from Kenya, called it a life-changing experience.

“I feel like a helicopter parent to the family. They are new here. We don’t want others to take advantage of them. So we are in touch regularly. We plan everything for them. We pick them up and drop them off,” said Bhatti, an IT professional. “Life has become more than mundanity. There is more purpose to it now.”

The three said Canada’s Syrian resettlement project helped the country’s nation building, especially in the wake of a divided federal election last October.

“Canada has given me a lot of opportunities and this is my time to pay back,” said Tejani, a Pakistani businessman who came to Canada more than three years ago.

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Nasim Misrabi fled Syria for Turkey and was resettled in Canada under the government sponsorship program. In July, he found a job as a marketing coordinator at K-Mobile.

Nasim Misrabi was volunteering for a group in Turkey monitoring the GPS signals of refugee boats in the open sea trying to cross to Greece when news of Alan Kurdi’s death emerged.

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“After that, people started posting photos of dead refugees on social media, because they saw the international media’s response to Alan. Everyone wanted to explain what they’re suffering,” said Misrabi, 25, of Damascus, who arrived in Toronto in February, sponsored by the Canadian government.

“In Turkey, we woke up every day and wondered how to find food. You just lived to survive. We lost all our hopes, so the sudden media attention was new.”

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Misrabi, who left Damascus in July 2015, has been volunteering for various Canadian groups since he came and was eventually offered a job as a marketing co-ordinator at K-Mobile.

“I was invited by a church for iftar, to break fast with other Muslims. I had never seen something like this in my country,” said Mirsabi, who is looking for a group to sponsor his mother, now left alone in Turkey.

“I will always remember Alan Kurdi. He changed the world and saved many lives.”

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Maher Azem, who came to Canada from Syria in 2005 to pursue a post-graduate degree at Ryerson University, said the Arab and Muslim community has become more engaged and mobilized, seeing the hope of change from the Liberal government’s commitment to the refugee crisis.

The 33-year-old Toronto man and others founded the Syrian Canadian Foundation to raise money and secure volunteers to help private sponsorship groups and settlement agencies serve the arriving refugees.

“Members of the community are working with different groups, and they interact. The community has moved from advocating for refugees to aiding them,” said Azem, a computer engineer, whose group has launched a Facebook page to help newcomers learn about Canadian culture.

The surge of interest in anything Syria also propelled Azem and friends to launch the first Syria Film Festival (SYFF) in November, to introduce Canadians to their new neighbours.

“We are just inspired by the power of the media to tell stories like Alan Kurdi’s,” said Azem, who is working with a production company on a documentary about a soccer league made up of Syrian refugees in Toronto.

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Shadi Al Qablawi, with his sons, Hani, 9, Abdullah, 8, and daughter Sham, 1. They lived in Jordan for three-and-a-half years and finally arrived Canada in February. Wife, Muna Nozha, is not in the photo.

Shadi Al Qablawi lived in constant fear in the three and a half years his family stayed in refuge in Jordan, worrying he would get caught working illegally in a gas station and sent back to Syria without his family knowing.

Sitting in an air-conditioned apartment in Mississauga he shares with his wife and three children, along with his mother and youngest sister, the 36-year-old man treasures the peace of mind and security he now enjoys.

Since he and his family arrived in Canada in February under the government-assisted resettlement program, the adults have been taking English classes while the kids were enrolled in school.

“When we first saw Alan Kurdi’s photo, we had zero expectations from the world, because we had seen other Syrian children killed every day,” said Al Qablawi, a cab driver from Damascus. “It’s so sad about that little boy, but his death has saved so many lives. We really owe him.”

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Vic and Bonnie Giesbrecht, son-in-law Mark Klassen (third from left), daughter Amy Klassen (in red), daughter Gina and son-in-law Paul Janzen (far right) and their grandchildren, worked together to sponsor the Yosef family from a refugee camp in Ethiopia to Yarrow, B.C.

Even before Alan Kurdi’s death drew Canadians’ attention to the Syrian crisis, Mark Klassen and his family were already exploring the idea of sponsoring a refugee family to resettle in their small hometown of Yarrow, in British Columbia.