

First Steps To Walking With Refugees



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Walk Story: Walking With Refugees In The West Bend

Toronto, ON, Canada

Caitlin Leach works with refugeeclaimants who pass through Romero House, helping them build new, safe lives. In 2014, Leach was among the leaders of “Walking with Refugees in the West Bend,” which explored issues surrounding the services provided to, and integration of, refugees into a west-end neighbourhood.

“I had not dreamed that 60 people would fill our small community centre at the start of the walk,” Leach observes. “Mostly, I had not imagined the impact that would be made by inviting one refugee, at the last minute, to speak to the crowd.”

Winnie was a client of Leach’s at Romero House who gave birth to her son Eli in January 2014. During a stop at the Four Villages Community Health Care Centre, Winnie noted how the community health system provided pre-natal care within days of her arrival in Canada, when she lacked medical insurance. “Later in the walk,” Leach notes, “she sang a song that she wrote for her son. She sang about the uncertainty of a life where the threat of deportation lingers on the horizon, and about the knowledge that her life is in God’s hands.”

“Winnie made real for the crowd an existence marked by repeated displacement, and the threat of future upheaval, but shaped by a strength that few can fathom. She made this city her own by showing it to others. By speaking for the refugees of Toronto, she claimed it as her city, and as their city.”

Getting Started

- First, you'll need to learn a bit about the situation of refugees in your city. Roughly how many are there? Where are they arriving from? What is their experience of arriving in your city like?
 - Start by going online and looking up local organizations that work with refugees. If you're not sure what exists in your community, contact the federal or state/provincial government office that oversees refugee resettlement, and ask them. (We've provided links for some countries below.) There may be a settlement centre, or other organizations that serve refugees in areas such as education, food security, health, and housing. These may include shelters and church or other faith-based groups. Local community legal clinics and women's shelters may also work with incoming refugees. Your local/regional branch office of Amnesty International may also be helpful.
 - Find out what kind of community outreach these organizations are doing. Does your local refugee shelter have a fundraising event? A regular open house? Do they ever hold public information meetings? You should go! This is a great way to learn more about refugee issues where you live, and furthermore, organizations that are doing outreach are likely to be interested in participating in Jane's Walk.
 - Get in touch with a shelter or settlement centre, and offer to take a staff member out for lunch. Be prepared to ask questions and listen!
 - Once you've learned something about the situation of refugees in your city, and met some community leaders, ask them if they can put you in touch with people who might want to lead a walk, or tell their stories on one. Or suggest they lead a walk themselves!
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How Can People Benefit from Leading a Jane's Walk?

- It's likely that most people in your community know about local refugee issues only through news reports. As Caitlin explains above, a Jane's Walk can give these stories a human face. It's a chance for refugees to meet some of their new fellow citizens and tell their own stories directly, not via the news media.
- Actually meeting people living as refugees can motivate citizens to get involved, and talking to those people can help them figure out what they can contribute. Colleen French of the Canadian Council for Refugees suggests making the last stop on the walk an opportunity for "people to not only ask questions and mingle with the speakers themselves, but also learn more about what they could do next. With major events like the Syrian crisis, it's important for people to feel like they can do something locally."
- For people who arrived as refugees and who have now been in the city a while, a walk can be a chance to show others in their community what they've accomplished. For example, [a walk in Buffalo, NY](#) put the spotlight on small businesses created by refugees.

Things to Bear In Mind

- The walk should be planned and led by people who have experienced life as a refugee, and their support workers, with your help. It's a platform for these people to tell their own stories, their own way; make sure that others are not speaking for them. Remember that, as Caitlin Leach puts it, "they are individuals and they have something to share."
- Sensitivity and confidentiality are important when interacting with the refugee community. Ask permission before using first and/or last names, the name of their previous country, their picture, and other personal details. It's possible that they have escaped personal threats in their former country, and they may still be in danger. Respect their privacy and create as safe a space as possible.
- If someone has a story they want to tell but is afraid of speaking publicly for the reasons described above, you could suggest that they write their story down and have someone they trust – a friend or support worker – read it on the walk.

Links

In Canada

Canadian Council for Refugees

<http://ccrweb.ca>

Romero House (Toronto)

<http://romerohouse.org/>

In The United States

Office of Refugee Resettlement (United States)

<http://www.acf.hhs.gov>

U.S. Committee of Refugees and Immigrants

<http://refugees.org/>

In the U.K.

Refugee Action (United Kingdom)

<http://www.refugee-action.org.uk/>

Jane's Walk is a movement of free, citizen-led walking tours inspired by Jane Jacobs. The walks get people to tell stories about their communities, explore their communities, and connect with neighbours. Find out more at janeswalk.org

Written by Nadia Halim, Jamie Bradburn, and Aisha Syed.

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