

Hamilton

'The most metal thing I've ever done': Metalheads sponsoring Syrian refugees



Group from The Doors Pub about to sponsor 2nd family fleeing violence in Syria

[Adam Carter](#) · CBC News · Posted: Mar 26, 2019 4:57 PM ET | Last Updated: March 26



A group of people who work at The Doors Pub are sponsoring Syrian refugees to help them get a new start in Hamilton. From left to right: translator Rola Chatah, Gol Bahar Muslim Hamo, Tyler Berglund, Julia Berglund, 7-year-old Brojista, Shannon Collins and 8-year-old Noursin. (Adam Carter/CBC)

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In Tyler Berglund's home, heavy metal imagery reigns supreme — from the embossed 666 plaques resting above a doorway in the kitchen, to the scores of life-sized Lord of the Rings

weapons lining the walls.

This might not be a home where you would initially expect to find people who would sponsor a family of Syrian refugees coming to Canada, fleeing persecution in search of a better life.

But that's exactly what Berglund — who owns Hamilton's heavy metal mainstay The Doors Pub — is doing, alongside a group of family and friends.

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- [Overnight arson at Hamilton mosque, fire put out by Syrian refugees](#)

Most refugee sponsors tend to be older, and part of faith-based institutions. That's a far cry from this group of atheists in their 30s, who are covered in tattoos and live and breathe extreme metal.

"The reaction we get from 100 per cent of the organizations we deal with is, 'Really? You?'" Berglund said.

"But I was just moved to contribute because of the luxuries we have in Canada."

In this clip produced by the Refugee Sponsorship Training Program, the Muslim Hamo family describes coming to Hamilton. 0:49

The group was first matched with a family with the help of the Refugee Sponsorship Training Program in June of last year. Gol Bahar Muslim Hamo was fleeing Syria alongside her husband, Dalil, and their two children: 8-year-old Noursin and 7-year-old Brojista.

The family needed to escape ISIS militants fighting to establish an Islamist state near Aleppo, Muslim Hamo said through a translator.

"I didn't want to lose my daughters," she said. "We were terrified. We heard horrific stories and [stories of] women kidnapped."

First Lebanon, then Canada

The family first left Syria in 2012 for Lebanon, where they spent years in a refugee camp. It was tough, especially for their children. There was no chance for a real education, she said.

So when the chance came through the United Nations to come to Canada, they jumped at it. But they did so with a lot of uncertainty, not even knowing the identities of their sponsors.



Much of Berglund's home is decked out in heavy metal imagery, like this portrait of iconic vocalist King Diamond. (Adam Carter/CBC)

When the family stepped off a plane in Ontario and saw Berglund and his co-sponsors — his sister Julia, as well as Shannon Collins, Caleb Collins, Jamie Mallory and Cheyenne Griffin — relief washed over them.

"I felt like I had someone. Like I was safe," Muslim Hamo said.

During an interview at Berglund's central Hamilton home, both the Muslim Hamo family and their sponsors gushed about how amazing their experience has been. It's a somewhat unlikely match for a family coming from a predominantly devout Muslim country and steadfast fans of a musical genre so often steeped in satanic themes.



Doors Pub, which is located near Hess Village, is primarily known for two things: loud, sweaty metal shows and tacos. (Submitted by the Refugee Sponsorship Training Program)

Muslim Hamo, for her part, says her sponsor's love of heavy metal never once caused any sort of rift.

"It didn't create any barrier," she said, adding that she never once thought "I don't want this in my life," despite some dark imagery.

- [**Syrian refugee family turned down by at least 17 Hamilton landlords**](#)

"They were open minded about everything," Berglund said.

The sponsorship group really got a kick out of Muslim Hamo liking a Facebook video Berglund once posted of Dimmu Borgir; a symphonic black metal band best known for songs like *Progenies of the Great Apocalypse* or a cover of Twisted Sister's *Burn in Hell*.

"There's potential for metal heads and for punk rockers to get involved in this," Berglund said of sponsorship. "There is compassion for these issues here.

"In angry music, there is a lot of veiled kindness and standing up to oppression."

A growing Syrian community

Metal is a music genre that has its problems too, with small sects of white supremacist bands and fans, and a historical culture of sexism. Berglund says he has gotten some negative reactions over refugee sponsorships from "a--holes," but on the whole, most are very supportive.

"I've even managed to change a few minds of bigoted people," he said.

"It's not like it's a choice for these people coming here," his sister Julia added. "They're fleeing violence and war."

Doors Pub owner Tyler Berglund talks about his experience sponsoring a refugee family from Syria. 0:32

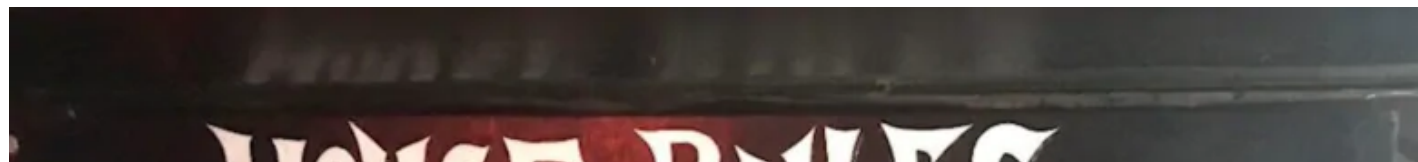
Many of those fleeing have settled in Hamilton in recent years. According to Wesley Urban Ministries, between December 2015 and December 2016, Wesley welcomed 1,654 refugees to Hamilton, with 1,338 of those coming from Syria.

In 2016 to 2017, there were 595 government-assisted refugees who settled in Hamilton, Wesley says, and 432 last year.

Most refugees still come from Syria, Wesley says, but also from places like Somalia, Congo, Pakistan, Iran, Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Sudan, Iraq and Palestine.

- [Syrian refugees escape horrors of war, bring taste of home to Hamilton](#)

"I work with so many Syrians," said Rola Chatah, who works as an interpreter in the city. "There's a big community here in Hamilton."





This sign hangs in Berglund's bar, the Doors Pub. (Submitted by The Refugee Sponsorship Training Program)

Now, the Muslim Hamo family is getting itself established in Hamilton. The kids are in school, learning English (and whenever they can, spending lots of time chasing Berglund's cats). Both parents are taking English courses as well, and preparing to welcome a new baby.

With one family getting on its feet, Berglund and his co-sponsors are now preparing to sponsor a second family — a burgeoning tradition they hope can continue for many years.

"I would describe this in two ways," Berglund said. "The first way is it's the most metal thing I've ever done, and then more specifically, to people who aren't in the metal community, I'd say it's the most meaningful thing I've ever done."

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