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Toronto couple's wedding vows in of new life to refugee family



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When Natasha Carew and Sean Ritchie got married last summer, they decided it was better to give than to receive.

The Toronto couple chose to forgo wedding gifts, and instead encouraged their guests to help raise \$26,000 to sponsor a refugee family and give them a new life in Canada.

After forming a core volunteer group of eight people, including the couple, Carew's mother, co-workers and friends, they were matched with a Sudanese family who had been stuck in limbo in Jordan for almost five years.

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Mohammed Abd Elnour, his wife Assgad Ali, and their two daughters, Rafea, 9, and Ruba, 5, arrived in Toronto from Amman on June 4, just three months after they were matched with Carew's group.

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opportunity we are afforded in Canada,” said Carew, a litigation lawyer with Gowling WLG, who, along with her husband, asked guests at their August 2017 [wedding](#) to help with the humanitarian endeavour. “We could have been the ones sitting in a refugee camp looking to get an opportunity for a new life from somebody.”

The quick arrival of a sponsored family is usually rare, but that’s not the case under the [Blended Visa Office Referred \(BVOR\)](#) program, which matches travel-ready refugees with sponsors. The program, which started in 2012, splits the cost of settlement between private sponsors and the federal government.

“It’s helpful the costs are shared,” said Carew. “You cannot sponsor specific people, but this is quick and your (pre-screened) family can be here in a few months.”

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As of last month, the blended program’s annual 1,500 targeted spots had not been filled. Meanwhile, private groups solely supporting their own selected refugees have already claimed the 18,000 spaces allocated this year by Ottawa and must now wait until next year for new spots. Ottawa does not allow unused capacity to carry over to the following year.

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annual quota for the blended sponsorship program, the University of Ottawa Refugee Hub, the Shapiro Foundation and Jewish Family Services Ottawa created a special fund to fully subsidize the financial commitment of private sponsors participating in the blended resettlement program. Refugees sponsored with the support of this fund will arrive before Dec. 31.

“More than 1,000 BVOR cases are at risk in 2018 if we do not mobilize Canadian sponsors,” said Jennifer Bond of the University of Ottawa. “The Refugee Hub is working with sponsors and other partners across Canada to bring as many vulnerable people to safety as we can before resettlement capacity is lost.”

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With a Sept. 17 application deadline looming, organizers have so far received more than 700 inquiries but only about 100 formal expressions of interest involving fewer than 500 sponsored refugees — half of the target.

“At a time of record high global needs and diminishing resettlement opportunities for refugees, these thousand spaces are more precious than ever,” said Ed Shapiro, trustee of the [Shapiro Foundation](#). “It is critical to support sponsor groups who have served as a model for welcoming refugees and by unbundling their required financial obligations, we hope they will be able to increase their 2018 resettlement commitments.”

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blended program has had a tough time meeting its yearly targets because private groups are more keen on sponsoring family members of Syrian newcomers' still stuck overseas, said Yosief Araya of the [Refugee Sponsorship Training Program](#).

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resources but not the money to support sponsored refugees,” said Araya, whose organization is tasked by Ottawa with matching private groups with refugees ready for resettlement who have been referred by Canadian visa posts.

While sole private sponsors must raise at least \$13,500 for start-up costs such as furniture, phones and clothes, as well as a year of financial support for a single refugee, groups participating in the blended program need only \$9,900 as Ottawa will shoulder six months of the newcomer’s income support.

Although the special subsidy wasn’t available when Carew, 34, and Ritchie, 37, decided to sponsor a family, they jumped at the chance to help others.

Sick and tired of wedding consumerism, the couple decided to dedicate their big day to a fundraising and refugee sponsorship event. Not only did they ask their guests to donate, they also created an email network for support and raised additional cash through social media and work.

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Although supporting a family of four under a blended program would only require \$20,000 from a private group, the couple set a target of \$26,000 because it costs more to live in Toronto.

Carew, who typically works 12-hour days, said the commitment to a

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guide the family through the initial settlement, including helping them apply for Canadian ID, enrolling the kids in school, using public transit and supporting them in day-to-day challenges.

“Some people were so negative about this process and thought it (would be) a massive undertaking that required full-time level commitment,” said Carew. “I work crazy hours but everyone could do it.”



Nicholas Keung is a Toronto-based reporter covering immigration. Follow him on Twitter: @nkeung

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