

HISTORY OF CASA EL NORTE

Casa El Norte is one of the oldest refugee shelters in Canada. The organization, known at that time as the Refugee Committee, began with a group of Fort Erie families- the Heckman's, the Hannigan's, the McDowell's, the Mindorff's and the Anzovino's. The call to action arose from their participation in the Renew Program at St. Michael's Church. One night, in a Renew group meeting, a member by the name of Vince Buklis shared his experiences of working as an immigration officer at the Peace Bridge. He voiced his humanitarian concerns about the large number of refugees arriving at the border who had no place to go in Canada and no money. He shared the story of a refugee boy by the name of Isaac who had been bayoneted in the back by soldiers in El Salvador severely damaging his spinal cord and leaving him for dead. But in fact, he survived, and he and his father had travelled to the Peace Bridge seeking protection in Canada, but they had no place to live. The group's response to the story was simply... "never again".

Seeing an opportunity to renew faith through action, a volunteer group called the Bridge Reception Committee was established to respond to calls from Canada Immigration when asylum seekers had no place to go. The Immigration Officers, who included Tim Seburn, Kathy Heximer, Al Schmidt, Joe Pagliacci, Jack Kuderian, Vince Bukalis and others, operated out of challenging work conditions in cold, damp portables while waiting for their facilities to be renovated, but they remained welcoming, kind and compassionate, some donating warm winter clothing for families arriving from Central and South America. Charlene and Patricia took the night shift for bridge pick up as they were kindergarten teachers during the day and Lynn and Pat Hannigan and Gerard Mindorff did the daytime pick ups. Rod McDowell provided legal representation for those who remained in the community.

With no shelter at the time, the group began a homestay program, first in their own homes and then as the need grew, they outreached to other faith groups across Niagara and Ontario. St. Philomena's parent volunteers and PTA gathered clothing for families arriving. Charlene and Bob Heckman hosted one of the first families on Easter in 1984, buying stuffed bunnies for the children who were afraid the Easter bunny wouldn't find them in Canada.

My husband Bob and I hosted families in our home until we could find permanent housing for them. It was a very enlightening & gratifying experience for our children and ourselves.

Charlene Heckman

The volunteer group worked closely with a refugee shelter in Buffalo known as VIVE and with Sisters Bonnie Butler and Betty DiCesare. They also worked closely with Nancy

Pocock, Chris Kurata, and Quaker House in Toronto. The Anglican Diocese of Niagara, through the efforts of Rod McDowell, provided financial support to hire a person to help find housing placements for refugees across Ontario.

In 1988, the first shelter residence used was a home rented at 130 Catherine Street in Fort Erie. Sister Margaret Quinn, Father Joe Mahoney, Rebecca Seburn, Theresa Anzovino, Joe Murphy and Linda Bowron volunteered to provide supports including housing, visitation, legal representation at immigration hearings and more.

Support continued to be provided by a growing ecumenical group of volunteers including the Surtel's, the Lapp's, the Orendorff's, Charlie Jones and many more who collected household donations and helped newly arrived refugees settle in Fort Erie. The group gathered on Friday evenings to eat, pray and laugh. It was a ministry of faith and friendship responding to Mathew 25:35 "I was a stranger, and you welcomed me."

A generous donation from the Sisters of St. Joseph in Peterborough and their Superior General, Sister Veronica O'Reilly, facilitated the purchase of Casa El Norte at 281 Central Avenue in Fort Erie. As the volume of asylum seekers grew, the volunteer group recognized they needed to hire staff for the shelter. Several weeks before Casa opened, the refugee committee hired Sister Judith Carroll and Sister Maureen Quinn from the community of the Sisters of St. Mary of Namur. In the mid 80's their religious community had made a corporate commitment to refugees. That faithful commitment continues today. Shortly after this, Casa El Norte hired Lynn Hannigan to provide daily oversight at the shelter. Lynn retired in September 2023 as Executive Director after 33 years of dedicated and compassionate service to refugees.

Casa El Norte opened its doors in 1990 with one resident from Thailand and a family of five from Honduras. Since that time, the shelter has been home to over 10,000 asylum seekers from different countries around the globe. Many of these residents have stayed and settled in Fort Erie or the Niagara Region. Over the years, the Casa has remained largely volunteer driven. Many from the community of the Sisters of St. Mary of Namur assisted with welcome, settlement and teaching ESL including Sister Sally, Sister Claire Marie, Sister Anne Elisabeth, Sister Kathleen and Sister Carol who volunteered for more than 15 years. Other volunteers included Marilyn Ostrich, Gerry Kogler, Joanne Stanton, Joe and Mary Gibbons and many more.

In 2001, with financial support from the Roman Catholic Diocese of St. Catharines, Casa El Norte bought a second transition home next door at 277 Central Avenue where refugees could live for longer periods of time. Many of the needed renovations to both properties at that time were done by Niagara College through their Many Hands Project.

In 2024, the Board made the difficult decision to close 277 Central Avenue because of a reduction in funding and to help finance major structural renovations needed on our 100+ year old home at 281 Central Avenue. This necessitated a temporary pause in service while

these renovations were completed. When we re-open in 2025, it will be on our rich history and a renewed vision sustained by the commitment of dedicated volunteers and staff and built on the inspiration of our origin story in the young boy named Isaac.