

Franciscan Oblates of St.-Joseph Srs. Gabrielle Servant and Pierette Bertrand visit a Syrian family and their newborn in 2017. They started working with refugees in 2012 when Syrian refugees came to Canada after the war in Syria. (Courtesy of Hakima Kalif)



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***Editor's note**: Global Sisters Report's new series, "Welcoming the Stranger," takes a closer look at women religious working with immigrants and migrants. While we cover this topic often, this series will feature sisters and organizations networking to better serve those crossing borders, global migration trends and the topic of immigration in the upcoming U.S. presidential election.*



Bordeaux-Cartierville is a little-known neighborhood to most. This district of first immigrants is a place of contrasts and social inequalities where multiple ethnic groups live side by side, as wealth borders extreme poverty. Located northwest of Montreal, Quebec, Canada, this is the first stop for many immigrants and refugees after they arrive at Montréal-Trudeau International Airport.

Presently, 60% of the neighborhood is multicultural, home to families from the Middle East, Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Africa, Haiti, Vietnam and Romania. It's also home to Franciscan Oblates of St.-Joseph Pierette Bertrand and Gabrielle Servant, who sponsor both Christian and Muslim immigrants and refugees.



Franciscan Oblates of St. Joseph Sr. Gabrielle Servant (GSR photo/Joanna Kozakiewicz)

At ages 86 and 80, respectively, with the help of two employees, the sisters aim to improve the quality of life and conditions in the area. They are known in the neighborhood as the only community in Montreal that works directly with immigrants.

"It all started in 2012 with Syrian refugees who came to Canada after the war in Syria," said Bertrand.

Working with the Ministry of Immigration, the sisters are required to welcome, install and help integrate those they sponsor. The sisters are responsible for the families'

well-being for a year. They make sure the adults are working and the children are placed in school. Their goal is for the families to be autonomous and respect their lease, but they will step in to help financially if necessary. They also need to ensure that the refugees have enough to eat and that their sanitary needs are met.



Franciscan Oblates of St. Joseph Sr. Pierette Bertrand (GSR photo/Joanna Kozakiewicz)

"The first five families, we installed them all along the same street. It made it easier for them to adapt," said Servant, who is in charge of finding suitable accommodation for newcomers.

Servant works during the week as an auxiliary nurse with the Sisters of Providence , but on the weekends you can find her making calls to learn about people's needs, cleaning apartments, and furnishing them with donated items from the community. She also fills the fridges with food for newcomers to enjoy their first night and breakfast in tranquility.

"In the beginning, we had to purchase things, especially for the kitchen, but nowadays people come and drop off donations by themselves," says Servant.

The sisters particularly sponsor those who arrive illegally either by Roxham Road — the unofficial border crossing between Quebec and New York — or those who arrive by the airport and declare themselves as humanitarian refugees.



Srs. Gabrielle Servant and Pierette Bertrand welcomed their fourth Syrian family of refugees at the Montreal airport in May 2014. (Courtesy of Hakima Kalif)

Sleman Youssef, a father of two, arrived from Syria in 2017 and was sponsored by the sisters. As a former lawyer in his home country, he had to adapt quickly to a

French-speaking city. When he arrived with his family, he lived for a year in Foyer du Monde, a shelter for refugees of all nationalities and religions. He is very fond of Betrand.

"She gave everything to me," Youssef told GSR "I am very far from my parents. I lost my mom in Syria during COVID. I often tell this to Sister Pierrette 'You're my mom here in Canada.' It's the truth. Every person, adult, child, even elderly, needs someone to be a mother or father by their side. She has been my family here in Canada, and she always will be."

When first arriving, Youssef worked various jobs such as driving an Uber and as a cook. He communicated with the help of Google Translate at first, before completing his studies in French thanks to financial help from Bertrand. He also pursued studies to become an immigration consultant and now is a director of international recruitment. Youssef also owns his own business and is on the board of directors of Foyer du Monde.



Sr. Gabrielle Servant stands in the basement of the congregation's house, where they store donated furniture for refugees. (GSR photo/Joanna Kozakiewicz)

Youssef said he is grateful for the moral support of the Franciscan Oblates. They were there for him when he struggled with depression and health problems. He remains in contact with the community and makes himself available to help families move. "It's a promise I intend to keep, to give to others as the Franciscans gave to me," said Youssef.

Quebec offers a variety of services for immigrants, making it possible for newcomers to stay up to three years, learn to speak French and integrate into society. However, that wasn't always the case.

"We resisted for a long time because Quebec didn't receive many immigrants at first. It was a story of the past. Italians, Greeks, and Chinese had come, but in small numbers, and they didn't make waves," said Bertrand.

When the war in Syria broke out, the sisters started to get busy with newcomers from other countries. "The whole Middle East was on fire. Then there was Africa, and Haiti, and it didn't stop there. So we started to see that we couldn't do it alone," said Bertrand.

To help with the increasing demand and facilitate communication with refugees, the sisters hired two women who speak Arabic: Hakima Kalif, who is originally from Morocco and works as a manager of private collective sponsorship and immigration consultant, and Marie Hossepian from Lebanon, who works as their receptionist.



Srs. Gabrielle Servant and Pierette Bertrand and their secretary, Marie Hossepian, stand at the front door of their congregation in Montreal. (GSR photo/Joanna Kozakiewicz)

"Nobody who rings the doorbell leaves empty-handed," says Hossepian, who has been working with the sisters since 2016. "You can't imagine what the sisters do here, it'll take me hours to tell you. I am so proud to be able to work here. What they do here is nothing short of a dream."

Social integration of the refugees

When Aline Alkabalan arrived in Canada in 2016, following the war in Syria, the sisters sponsored the family. At first, Aline's family communicated with the sisters through her cousin who translated. Eventually, Alkabalan and her family took lessons in French and the sisters made sure they could integrate society with ease.

"There was someone who went with us to take care of the health insurance cards, permanent residence cards, our school registration, and introduced us to the

neighborhood so that we knew where the grocery stores were and how to use the public transit," said Alkabalan, now 22.

Newcomers in Quebec are entitled to two years of French lessons. Additionally, the sisters find ways to help refugees learn French and with the help of volunteer sisters from the Institut de Formation Humaine Intégrale de Montréal (Institute of Integral Human Training from Montreal) they offer their time twice a week to practice through games and role-play scenarios that could help newcomers learn how to communicate in French in their daily routine, such as at the bank or in a clinic.

The sisters are also dedicated to helping refugees integrate socially by organizing birthday parties, Christmas celebrations and trips to Quebec, or to visit the sanctuary in Cap-de-la-Madeleine. Finally, they also organize formation sessions about legislation in Quebec to help refugees familiarize themselves with the law.



Families arrive at the Refugee Reception Center during the arrival of many Syrian families sponsored by the Franciscan Oblates of St. Joseph 2015-2016. (Courtesy of Hakima Kalif)

Sponsoring refugees has its challenges.

"Sponsorship has become more and more complicated because the government has a number of criteria and a way of selecting that no longer makes sense," Bertrand said. "For example, every three months they open the program for sponsorship, and we're entitled to 10 names each time, that are chosen by drawing lots."

The sisters sometimes face hard situations, such as the story of a young girl from Chad, Africa, that broke Bertrand's heart.

"There were particular cases that opened our eyes to the distress these people are living with," Bertrand said "For instance, there was a little girl, age 5, who was about to start school. She arrived here with very bad oral hygiene. All of her teeth had cavities. She was suffering tremendously and her mom did not have the funds to help take care of it. It was something to weep about. We paid for her dentist and followed up with specialists to see if she is able to function despite the poison she endured from her teeth."

The sisters also help organize funerals and support the refugees as they adjust to a new custom.

"There was one man who had no idea about how funerals work in Quebec," Bertrand said. "We went to a funeral home and when he heard about the embalming he was horrified. He wanted to put his father in a sheet. He started to cry when he heard that he would have to purchase a cemetery lot as he had no money."

The sisters paid for the funeral and found a reception hall where he could receive condolences as is custom in his country.

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I was a stranger and you welcomed me

According to Kalif, the sisters have sponsored 120 families between 2012 to 2023, including couples with children, seniors and single adults.

Kalif, who visits the refugees, communicates in Arabic, and takes note of what those needs are to fill out the necessary paperwork, speaks with pride about families who have been able to integrate into society with much success.

"There's one family in St.-Jean-sur-Richelieu, two families in Fabreville and another in Boisbriand who have bought houses," Kalif said "Almost all the families who arrived between 2012 and 2017 learned French, studied and bought apartments or houses."

The immigrants and refugees who the sisters help often call and visit them, showing their gratitude by bringing cakes, presents or sharing a meal. The sisters maintain contact with everyone they sponsor.

"Together, we are like a big family," Servant said "All these people we received, we consider them our family. We are attached to them, and it's beautiful."

This story appears in the **Welcoming the Stranger** feature series. View the full series.