

(http://this.org)

Home (//this.org) Twitter (//twitter.com/thismagazine) Facebook (//www.facebook.com/thismagazine) Tumblr (//quote.this.org) Google+ (https://plus.google.com/111261864408643365875/) e-Newsletter (//eepurl.com/bwhgr) RSS



Attack of the killer carp

(http://this.org/magazine/2012/08/15/attack-of-the-killer-carp/?utm_source=thismag&utm_medium=header&utm_campaign=skybar)



Grandma's bedroom secrets

(http://this.org/magazine/2012/08/02/grandmas-bedroom-secrets/?utm_source=thismag&utm_medium=header&utm_campaign=skybar)



An ode to the magical moments in Canadian music festivals

(http://this.org/magazine/2012/08/01/an-ode-to-the-magic-in-canadian-music-festivals-2/?utm_source=thismag&utm_medium=header&utm_campaign=skybar)



Postcard from: New York City

(http://this.org/magazine/2012/06/04/postcard-from-new-york-city/?utm_source=thismag&utm_medium=header&utm_campaign=skybar)



JJ Levine tackles sexuality with lens and scissors

(http://this.org/magazine/2012/05/31/jj-levine-tackles-sexuality-with-pen-and-scissors/?utm_source=thismag&utm_medium=header&utm_campaign=skybar)

(http://this.org/blog/2011/06/09/magazine-1-year-again/)

Subscribe (http://this.org/subscribe/)

Donate (http://this.org/support/)

Digital Subscription (http://this.org/digital/)

15 Years of This Magazine (http://this.org/15years/)

Contribute (http://this.org/contribute/)

Advertise (http://this.org/advertise/)

Great Canadian Literary Hunt (http://this.org/contribute/great-canadian-literary-hunt/)

Writers' Guidelines (http://this.org/contribute/writers-guidelines/)

Contact (http://this.org/about/contact/)

About (http://this.org/about/)

Internships (http://this.org/about/internships/)

RSS Feeds (http://this.org/read/rss-feeds/)

Tweet 0 Recommend 6 Send

July 30, 2009

Popular on Twitter Facebook

Gimme Shelter: refugees who found sanctuary in Canadian churches

By Morgan Dunlop

Three Canadian church congregations stood up to Immigration Canada and the police to save the lives of refugees in peril. Some say they should butt out.

Follow @thismagazine 8,040 followers

Check out our brand new look! (http://this.org/blog/2012/08/29/a-sneak-peek-at-this-magazines-redesign/?utm_source=retweets&utm_medium=sidebar&utm_campaign=popular) 17 RETWEETS

Attack of the killer carp (http://this.org/magazine/2012/08/15/attack-of-the-killer-carp/?utm_source=retweets&utm_medium=sidebar&utm_campaign=popular) 17 RETWEETS

Urban Agriculture Roundup (http://this.org/blog/2012/08/28/urban-agriculture-roundup/?utm_source=retweets&utm_medium=sidebar&utm_campaign=popular) 9 RETWEETS

Internships - This Magazine (http://this.org/about/internships/?utm_source=retweets&utm_medium=sidebar&utm_campaign=popular) 48 RETWEETS

On today's blog // Listening to Lisa Myers and Autumn Chacon cook at the AGO // (http://this.org/blog/2012/08/16/listening-to-lisa-myers-and-autumn-chacon-cook-at-the-ago/?utm_source=retweets&utm_medium=sidebar&utm_campaign=popular) 6 RETWEETS



(http://this.org/gift/?utm_source=thismagazine&utm_medium=sidebar_ad&utm_campaign=gift2011)

Quote This

Current cover



Explore This

search Go

Browse by category:
 Select category

Browse by date:
 Select Month

Contact This

1-877-999-THIS

editorial: editor@this.org
 business: publisher@this.org

417-401 Richmond St. West
 Toronto, Ontario, M5V 3A8

© Red Maple Foundation
 Charitable registration number
 11911 3140 RR0001

ISSN: 1491-2678



Abdekader Belaoui hasn't left the grounds of St. Gabriel's Church in Montreal in more than three years. Illustration by Todd Jule.

“The price of freedom is to go to the limit.”

2010 Nobel Peace Prize winner Liu Xiaobo, in a letter to his wife (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/nov/12/liu-xiaobo-book-lifts-gag>) about police brutality he witnessed while imprisoned by the Chinese government. Liu is currently imprisoned on an 11-year sentence for his writing and poetry about democratic reform, and reportedly does not know he won the Nobel. The first English-language translation of Liu's writings (<http://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?isbn=9780674061477>) will be published in January 2012 by Harvard University Press.

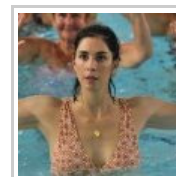
Visit our quotation Tumblr at quote.this.org (<http://quote.this.org>) and submit your own by tweeting us @thismagazine (<http://twitter.com/thismagazine>) or emailing quote at this.org.

Hot Commentary

- Attack of the killer carp (<http://this.org/magazine/2012/08/15/attack-of-the-killer-carp/>)
 1 comment · 4 weeks ago

Recommended Reading

You might like:



(<http://this.org/magazine/2012/08/30/why-cant-johnny-blog/>)
 (http://this.org/magazine/2012/08/30/why-cant-johnny-blog/)
 (http://this.org/magazine/2012/08/30/why-cant-johnny-blog/)
 (http://this.org/magazine/2012/08/30/why-cant-johnny-blog/)
 (http://this.org/magazine/2012/08/30/why-cant-johnny-blog/)
 (http://this.org/magazine/2012/08/30/why-cant-johnny-blog/)
 (http://this.org/magazine/2012/08/30/why-cant-johnny-blog/)
 (http://this.org/magazine/2012/08/30/why-cant-johnny-blog/)
 (http://this.org/magazine/2012/08/30/why-cant-johnny-blog/)
 (http://this.org/magazine/2012/08/30/why-cant-johnny-blog/)
 (http://this.org/magazine/2012/08/30/why-cant-johnny-blog/)



(<http://this.org/magazine/2012/05/25/why-cant-johnny-blog/>)
 (http://this.org/magazine/2012/05/25/why-cant-johnny-blog/)
 (http://this.org/magazine/2012/05/25/why-cant-johnny-blog/)
 (http://this.org/magazine/2012/05/25/why-cant-johnny-blog/)
 (http://this.org/magazine/2012/05/25/why-cant-johnny-blog/)
 (http://this.org/magazine/2012/05/25/why-cant-johnny-blog/)
 (http://this.org/magazine/2012/05/25/why-cant-johnny-blog/)
 (http://this.org/magazine/2012/05/25/why-cant-johnny-blog/)
 (http://this.org/magazine/2012/05/25/why-cant-johnny-blog/)
 (http://this.org/magazine/2012/05/25/why-cant-johnny-blog/)
 (http://this.org/magazine/2012/05/25/why-cant-johnny-blog/)

In 1990, Felicia Abimbola Akinwalere (“Ola” to her friends) arrived in Toronto from Nigeria on a temporary visa to visit family. During that vacation, her husband took part in a failed military coup, went missing, and was declared dead. Scared to return home, Akinwalere remained in Toronto and, in accordance with Nigerian tradition, married her husband’s brother—a Canadian citizen living in Mississauga. Together they had a

daughter, Alice. Upon settling in Mississauga, Akinwalere joined a local church, Trinity Anglican, where she taught Sunday school. She also worked as a babysitter in the neighbourhood and got her certificate to be a personal support worker. She had a family, made new friends, and put down roots in the community. But in 2006, after two unsuccessful appeals to Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) to stay in the country on humanitarian and compassionate grounds, Akinwalere was issued a deportation order. Reverend Steven Mackison and more than 20 members of the congregation at Trinity Anglican were outraged at the verdict and offered her their unconditional support. Having exhausted every other option to prevent her deportation, the congregants invoked the only power they had left: they offered her sanctuary on the grounds of their church. For two years, Akinwalere stayed at Trinity Anglican and a group of about 25 congregants worked, on a rotating schedule, to do laundry and grocery shopping for her. They donated enough money for a computer and cable television. Her daughter, Alice, would also visit, often spending the night. For birthdays and other holidays Akinwalere's support team would organize dinner parties in the church garden next to the cemetery.

Then, last September, Akinwalere's life at Trinity Anglican was suddenly disrupted: an anonymous Mississauga resident called the Peel regional police complaining that an illegal immigrant was living in a nearby church basement. Soon after, without consulting CIC, a lone police officer drove to Trinity Anglican to break the church's sanctuary. Margaret Yeo, a 79-year-old retired nurse and congregation member, found Akinwalere in the church garden about to be handcuffed and demanded an explanation from the police officer. She quickly phoned Mackison to inform him of the arrest, and when Mackison arrived at the police station, he explained to the officers there that CIC officials had known of Akinwalere's whereabouts since she was first admitted to the church in 2006. He also told them there was going to be a rally the following Sunday against Akinwalere's deportation order (which had been organized weeks before her arrest) that would be attended by the media and more than 200 local supporters, including local MP Paul Szabo and the regional Anglican bishop. Within 24 hours CIC granted Akinwalere a temporary stay on her deportation order. The planned rally turned into a celebration instead.

Churches across Canada, just like Trinity Anglican, have become part of the modern sanctuary movement—acting as a safety net for vulnerable refugees who slip through the cracks of Canada's immigration system. The practice—an ancient one, but unofficial in a legal sense—recognizes the church as a safe haven for refugees who parishioners feel have been unfairly denied immigrant status. Sanctuary offers no legal protection, but, while police or federal officials can go into a church to remove a person under a deportation order, they rarely do; Akinwalere was only the third person to experience this in Canadian history.

The roots of sanctuary are centuries old: the concept dates back to ancient Greece and Rome. In the fifth century AD, Roman law guaranteed that churches could provide refuge, even for criminals. But in the 17th century, as the modern nation-states strengthened and the church's influence over law waned, the practice declined. Sanctuary, in a modern sense, has existed in Canada since 1983, when a Guatemalan was given refuge in a Montreal church and eventually granted a stay of deportation.

Since then, more than 250 illegal immigrants have lived in Canadian sanctuaries. Today, there are two recent success stories (Akinwalere is one of them, the other is Shree Kumar Rai in Ottawa) and one active case: Abdelkader Belaouni in Montreal. However, sanctuary providers argue that this low number is not indicative of the number of refugees in Canada who have been unjustly denied immigrant status. They say that sanctuary is merely a symptom of deeper problems in Canada's immigration process. Michael Cassidy, former leader of the NDP and member of the sanctuary committee of the First Unitarian Congregation in Ottawa (where Shree Kumar Rai lived

for more than two years) says, “We are aware that for every person who enters sanctuary there must be hundreds who may have had a good case, but, for some reason, the merits of their case were not judged appropriately and they were forced to leave or to go into hiding.”

One refugee who definitely isn't hiding is Abdelkader Belaoui. He goes by “Kader” to his friends, and that's a long list. While many refugees and non-status migrants stay quiet and try to fly under the radar, Belaoui is outspoken, larger than life. He lives in a large old house that sits on the same grounds as St. Gabriel's Church in the Point Saint-Charles neighbourhood of Montreal. The home is on church property and therefore functions as a sanctuary. In the second-floor sitting room, 42-year-old Belaoui takes a half-dozen strides, reaches with an outstretched arm, swivels his hips, and flops onto a plush pink couch. With that, he cracks a wide, full-lipped, chubby-cheeked smile. He lost his vision when he was 25 and sports tinted brown glasses that reflect the bright sun flooding in through the large windows behind us.

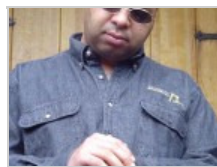
In 1996, Belaoui arrived in New York City after fleeing the civil war in Algeria. But after the post-9/11 backlash against Arabs and Muslims and the notorious “special registration”—a process wherein the U.S. government ordered everyone of certain nationalities to be fingerprinted, photographed, interrogated, and, for about 13 percent, deported—Belaoui fled to Montreal with the help of a Canadian friend. After immersing himself in the Point Saint-Charles community, making numerous close friends and perfecting his fluent French, Kader received a deportation order on January 5 2006. He entered sanctuary at St. Gabriel's shortly after that.

Belaoui has lived in this quasi-incarceration for more than three years and he's kept busy. Without leaving the house, he produced an album, *No Human Is an Island*, with Muslim rapper TuThree. He gives French and Arabic lessons to students in Montreal and he broadcasts a monthly radio show (from the same pink couch he's sitting on) for CKUT, the non-profit McGill University community radio station. The current-affairs show, *Radio Sanctuary*, features French and English speakers. The guests range from politicians to local residents of interest, and the topics vary from local issues to global warming and the war in Iraq (but never to Belaoui's own situation). He's currently working on his second album and an autobiography. His buoyant personality seldom betrays it, but he feels the length of his stay and the uncertainty of his future weighing down on him. “I'm tired,” he says. “Everyone else gets out in a few months, a few years—I've been here for three years and four months now.”



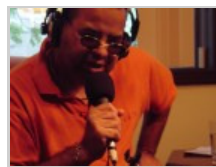
(http://this.org/magazine/files/2009/07/ja09_sanctuary_kader1.jpg)

Belaouni supporters outside St. Gabriel's church in September 2006. Photo credit: CMAQ.



(http://this.org/magazine/files/2009/07/ja09_sanctuary_kader2.jpg)

Abdelkader Belaouni in front of St. Gabriel's Church in September 2006. Photo credit: CMAQ.



(http://this.org/magazine/files/2009/07/ja09_sanctuary_kader3.jpg)

Belaouni producing his radio show, Radio Sanctuary, in September 2006. Photo credit: CMAQ.



(http://this.org/magazine/files/2009/07/ja09_sanctuary_kader4.jpg)

A December 2006 march and protest in Montreal supporting Belaouni. Photo credit: CMAQ.



(http://this.org/magazine/files/2009/07/ja09_sanctuary_kader5.jpg)

A protester outside St. Gabriel's church marks Belaouni's third year in sanctuary in 2007. Photo credit: CMAQ.



(http://this.org/magazine/files/2009/07/ja09_sanctuary_kader6.jpg)

A 2006 rally in front of St. Gabriel's Church in support of Abdelkader Belaouni. Photo credit: CMAQ.

Belaouni, Rai, and Akinwalere have very different stories, but the common thread that links all three is the dreadful treatment they have received from Citizenship and Immigration Canada. Poor translation, poor legal representation, misinformation, arbitrary decision-making, and a general lack of empathy characterize nearly every contact they have had with the system.

Let's be friends!

Follow @thismagazine 8,040 followers

Like 2,071 people like this.

Today, Akinwalere is waiting for the outcome of her third appeal on humanitarian and compassionate grounds. Her current lawyer, Chantal Desloges, an immigration and refugee specialist and partner at Green & Spiegel, is confident that she has a strong case. Deporting Akinwalere would mean separating her from her Canadian husband and daughter. Bringing her daughter with her to Nigeria would not only mean uprooting Alice from the only home she has ever known, but also putting her at risk of the illegal but widely practiced female genital mutilation. "There were a lot of really important factors that were missing from the previous submission," says Desloges. "It's my opinion that if all of those factors had been in front of the immigration officer at the time, they probably would have come to a different conclusion."

Akinwalere's experience illustrates some of the problems that plague the immigration system in Canada. Just before she moved into the church in 2006, Akinwalere and 20 of her friends and supporters attended a judicial review in Toronto to argue that her deportation should be stayed while her third humanitarian appeal was heard by CIC officials. Akinwalere's lawyer and a crown attorney arguing in favour of deportation met before a judge by teleconference in a cramped boardroom; communication was difficult, and the judge frequently needed Akinwalere's Nigerian-born lawyer to repeat himself. The congregants who attended describe the proceeding as rushed and unfair, and Akinwalere's friends and advocates found it an unsettling and disappointing scene

to witness. “It served nobody,” says Robert Gadsby, a retired civil servant and president of Akinwalere’s support team. “This was my country—Canada—and I was embarrassed.”

What the sanctuary-providing churches really want is a fair immigration process, one that fixates less on obscure technicalities and more on justice. This, they believe, can be achieved if the government would implement a merit-based appeal process. And they’re not alone: Peter Showler, the former chair of the Immigration and Refugee Board and director of the Refugee Forum at the University of Ottawa, says, “there are mistakes being made by members that are not being caught by inadequate review procedures now in place that would be caught by a refugee appeal division.” Such a thing should exist, in fact, because a formal appeals process was part of the Canadian Immigration and Refugee Protection Act passed by Parliament in 2002—but it has never been implemented. At the same time, the number of IRB members judging a claimant was reduced from two to one. With a second IRB member considering each claimant, Showler says, “you’ve got a second set of eyes, a second set of ears, a second way of asking a question, of understanding a culture. It really makes a huge difference.” But he says that a single-member IRB would suffice if there was a merit-based appeal process.

Created in 1989, Canada’s refugee board process provides oral hearings for refugee claimants. But critics argue that the system is rife with problems: faulty translation, poor legal representation, a misreading of actual country conditions or, most frequently, refugees so traumatized that they give confusing answers and are thought to lack “credibility.” Currently, there is no mechanism to appeal an IRB decision. The federal government points to other avenues, such as the federal court’s judicial review, as ways that refugees can have recourse. But only 14 percent of cases are even granted leave for review, and only a fraction of those end up being reversed. And transferring the matter to federal courts introduces other limitations: in a judicial review, there is no opportunity to review a refugee’s credibility or introduce new evidence.

Two other avenues remain, a “pre-removal risk assessment” (where a CIC officer assesses the risk on a refugee claimant’s life upon return to their country of origin) or a humanitarian and compassionate-grounds application. Critics, however, deem both processes pointless if a refugee’s credibility has been denounced by the original IRB official.

The system, as it works now, leaves too much room for error and offers few opportunities to correct those mistakes. “What we are seeing,” says Showler, “is a significant number of cases where there are good grounds for thinking the person is a refugee and no real opportunities to get [an unfair verdict] fixed afterwards.” An appeals process would also allow for targeted review of IRB decision-making. If, for instance, an IRB member had grant rates, or rejection rates, outside the expected range, their decisions could be re-examined.

And the evidence shows that such arbitrariness is rampant: a recent study by Sean Rehaag, professor at the Osgoode Hall Law School, that looks at figures from 2006 shows that some members grant refugee status in 95 percent of cases, while others grant refugee status in as little as 5 percent of cases. The IRB argues that these fluctuations occur because some members only examine refugee claims from specific countries, or only expedited cases. But Rehaag argues that these specializations do not account for the exceptionally high variance in acceptance rates. “People who hear similar subsets of claims still have very, very different grant rates,” he says.

Shree Kumar Rai has experienced many of these failings first-hand. He had been living in the sanctuary of Ottawa-based First Unitarian Church of Canada for more than two years. Rai fled Nepal in 1996 after his political party, the United People’s Front, joined

forces with the Maoists and dropped its policy of non-violence. At his first IRB hearing, his application was rejected because of his membership in the UPF (the IRB member thought, incorrectly, that the UPF had been violent when Rai was involved). The federal court's judicial review eventually overturned the faulty rejection and advised that a new hearing be set up as soon as possible. Rai waited four years for his second IRB hearing. This time, a new member rejected his entire claim based on credibility (a catchall term used by board members who find a refugee's testimony "unreliable"). The member cited the fact that Rai was not on Amnesty International's list of Nepalese refugees as a reason for denying him status. Amnesty, however, makes no claims to listing every single refugee from a country. Another reason listed for denying Rai's claim was the fact that he had paid for identity cards to get out of Nepal. The member rejected the notion that there could be corruption in the Nepalese border services and that therefore payment for identification documents would be necessary. Of this justification, Showler says, "'Ludicrous' is a reasonable word to describe it."

Plenty of religious groups point to cases like Rai's as evidence that the immigration and refugee hearing process is profoundly broken, that refugees often do not get a fair hearing, and that there is no way to course-correct or appeal. The system, they say, simply fails to meet Canadian standards of justice. In granting sanctuary, they are condemning the system and, essentially, taking the law into their own hands. They don't take the decision lightly.

Michael Creal, former York University humanities professor and head of the Southern Ontario Sanctuary Coalition, explains that refugees are only taken into sanctuary as a last resort and only if certain criteria are met. The evidence must be compelling that either an error has been made in the IRB judgment, all legal options appear to have been exhausted, legal representation has been faulty, or there is new evidence and documentation to present to the IRB. Until a merit-based appeal is implemented—as legislation requires—some churches will continue to harbour refugees on moral grounds, if not legal ones.

A spokesperson for the Canada Border Service Agency (CBSA), the enforcement arm of CIC, wouldn't comment on specific cases, but she said "the federal government does not condone individuals hiding in churches to avoid removal from Canada." James Bissett, former head of the Immigration Foreign Service, is more vocal in his disapproval of the practice. "The church should leave the decision as to who should stay in Canada, and who should leave, to the immigration authorities and government," says Bissett. "And they should read their Bibles."

It is difficult to say how many illegal immigrants there are in Canada. In May 2008, Auditor General Sheila Fraser announced that there were 41,000 people that Canada wanted to deport but could not find. Sanctuary is seen by some as a possible back door into Canada. But churches assert that they aren't providing a port of easy entry, but rather a necessary service for refugees who they just can't in good conscience turn away. The churches recognize, however, the liminal space they occupy between legal and illegal. "It is disruptive," says Creal. "It is a challenge to the system of power, and it can be met with considerable anger, or just cold resistance, on the part of the government."

Over the past two decades, the government has had a precarious relationship with sanctuary providers. In 2004 the minister of immigration, Judy Sgro, suggested that churches bring forward 12 cases a year for her department to expedite. Randy Lippert, criminology professor at the University of Windsor and author of *Sanctuary, Sovereignty, Sacrifice: Canadian Sanctuary Incidents, Power, and Law*, suggests that the Conservative government has not been good for sanctuary. Compared to previous administrations, there is little dialogue between sanctuary providers and the government, either publicly or privately.

To a certain extent, these congregations are performing a vital function. All legal institutions make mistakes. “In criminal law, for example, we have very robust protections: the presumption of innocence, the requirement that the government prove the person committed the crime beyond a reasonable doubt,” says Rehaag, and yet the criminal system still makes occasional mistakes. And the success rate of sanctuary is fairly impressive: just under 60 percent of individuals in sanctuary become Canadian permanent residents.

But there is a significant cost to providing sanctuary. For one thing, it’s a huge commitment of time and energy: in the late 1980s, periods in sanctuary averaged a few months; today, more than two years isn’t uncommon. It also requires a substantial investment financially. Congregations must raise enough funds to support the refugee, and this can range from a couple thousand dollars to more than \$15,000 a year, depending on the circumstances. Since the refugee cannot leave church property, supporters have to perform all their errands, from grocery shopping to laundry. “It felt like they did everything for me,” says Akinwalere. “They had amazing strength and generosity. They did everything except swallow my food for me.” The First Unitarian Church in Ottawa had a volunteer witness sleep over every night with their refugee to ensure that someone was present in case police came to make an arrest. “It’s not just like providing a lunch for street people,” says Creal. “This is total, 24-hours-a-day responsibility.” Despite being drained of resources and energy, congregation members report feeling enriched by the experience. “At its best,” says Creal, “it can be a hugely positive experience for a community and congregation. You’re doing something for someone in need, and it can change you.”

The future of this medieval reincarnation is uncertain. Parliament has been tossing a bill back and forth for the past few years that would see the legislated formal appeal process implemented. In 2007 the House of Commons approved the bill (then called C-280). In 2008 the Senate approved it. Unfortunately the House did not have time to approve the Senate amendments before the election was called in September 2008, and the bill died. A new version of the bill, sporting a few amendments and now called C-291, was brought before the House of Commons in April by Thierry St-Cyr of the Bloc Québécois. But after a second reading, Parliament decided to suspend it indefinitely. Whether Bill C-291 will ever pass is uncertain. If it does, and the IRB implements a formal appeals process, the premise for providing sanctuary will essentially fall away. But Rehaag cautions that even with improved processes in place, it may not signal the end of sanctuary. “Even if the refugee appeal division was implemented there would still be mistakes that would occur,” says Rehaag. “It’s possible that people would then try to turn to sanctuary in order to avoid being deported to face persecution, torture, or death.”

The congregation at Ottawa’s First Unitarian Church were trying to protect Rai from just that when they took him into sanctuary on February 27, 2007. After a two-year-long campaign on the part of Rai’s support team, their efforts finally paid off. CIC decided to admit him as a skilled worker (he is a sushi chef) and to allow that a brief trip across the U.S. border would satisfy the deportation order he had sidestepped by entering sanctuary. This type of brief exit and return to Canada is called “flagpoling,” and it is sometimes used by Canadian residents who have to re-enter the country to officially immigrate.

At 7:45 a.m. on Thursday, April 23, Michael Cassidy and his wife waved goodbye as Showler, Rai, and an immigration official drove to the Canada Border Services Agency in Ottawa. “I was excited,” says Rai, “but I was a little bit nervous also. It was my first time in two years to go outside from the sanctuary.” After an hour-long wait at the CBSA office, Rai and Showler were approached by two large armed officials with ominous looks on their faces. Without acknowledging Showler, they gestured to Rai to get up and follow them. After his processing, Showler, Rai, and the senior CIC official

continued their journey to the border. Rai was processed by the CBSA as a refugee exiting Canada and then taken to the nearest border point at Ogdensburg, N.Y. After a spin around the American flagpole (hence the flagpoling), Rai entered Canada as a landed immigrant coming to a job as a skilled worker. “That was when he knew he was a free man and a Canadian,” says Showler. “The look of relief on his face was heartwarming.” Rai’s wife, Dikchhya, and son, Aditya, who are still in Nepal, have also been accepted by Canada and arrived here in mid-June this year to rejoin the husband and father they have not seen for more than a dozen years. Since being free Rai has been scouting for an apartment and exploring Ottawa; he is happy and excited about his new life, but he knows it wouldn’t have been possible without the members of the First Unitarian Church. “They saved my life,” says Rai. “They protected me. I will never forget them.”

As for Akinwalere, the other recent graduate of Canadian sanctuary, she’s keeping busy: she volunteers at a local daycare program and works part-time as a personal support worker in Mississauga, where one of the residents is a former Trinity Anglican parishioner: the cared-for has become the caregiver.

In Montreal, leaning back into the pink sofa, Kader lifts one leg over the other and begins talking about what it’s like being confined in this house. “I miss the feel of rain,” he says. “I miss the feel of the sun.” He constantly dreams of being free and confesses that he never feels like he’s fully living in the present. His supporters have sent letters to members of the government and the opposition, led demonstrations, and held numerous fundraisers—all to no avail. Kader doesn’t know when he’ll be free, if ever. But he’s staying positive.

His bedroom, across the hall, is a cramped space containing a few cherished possessions: a keyboard, a guitar, a blind-assisted computer, a boom box, a coffee machine, and a single bed. As he demonstrates his blind-assisted computer for me, he stumbles upon a poem he’s written. It describes how much he misses freedom. As I read it, he sits on the single bed, lifts the nearby guitar, and starts strumming a melody, then stops. “I’m 100 percent a positive person,” he says. “The future is going to be great for me, once I get my freedom.”

Keywords:

Equality ([Http://this.org/magazine/category/equality/](http://this.org/magazine/category/equality/)), Immigration ([Http://this.org/magazine/category/immigration/](http://this.org/magazine/category/immigration/)), July-August 2009 ([Http://this.org/magazine/category/issues/july-august-2009/](http://this.org/magazine/category/issues/july-august-2009/)), Abdelkader Belaoui ([Http://this.org/magazine/tag/abdelkader-belaoui/](http://this.org/magazine/tag/abdelkader-belaoui/)), Churches ([Http://this.org/magazine/tag/churches/](http://this.org/magazine/tag/churches/)), Citizenship And Immigration Canada ([Http://this.org/magazine/tag/citizenship-and-immigration-canada/](http://this.org/magazine/tag/citizenship-and-immigration-canada/)), Deportation ([Http://this.org/magazine/tag/deportation/](http://this.org/magazine/tag/deportation/)), Felicia Abimbola Akinwalere ([Http://this.org/magazine/tag/felicia-abimbola-akinwalere/](http://this.org/magazine/tag/felicia-abimbola-akinwalere/)), Immigration ([Http://this.org/magazine/tag/immigration/](http://this.org/magazine/tag/immigration/)), Immigration And Refugee Board ([Http://this.org/magazine/tag/immigration-and-refugee-board/](http://this.org/magazine/tag/immigration-and-refugee-board/)), Immigration Canada ([Http://this.org/magazine/tag/immigration-canada/](http://this.org/magazine/tag/immigration-canada/)), Montreal ([Http://this.org/magazine/tag/montreal/](http://this.org/magazine/tag/montreal/)), Ottawa ([Http://this.org/magazine](http://this.org/magazine/)

More like this:

Share:



[Comments](#) [Refugees](#)

[\(http://this.org/magazine](#)

[/tag/refugees/\)](#) Sanctuary

[\(http://this.org/magazine](#)

[/tag/sanctuary/\)](#), Shree Kumar Rai

0 Stars

Leave a message...

Discussion

Community

”