

A question follows them every day: Can I stay or not?

Before I even learn her name, she gives me a bear hug. “You came at the right time, we’re just preparing dinner,” says the sturdy woman with an open face and a soft Latin American accent. “I’m Carolina, from Chile.” The others gather around me, smiling and extending their hands. “Come in, come in,” someone says. “Welcome.” As I return handshakes and a few more hugs, it occurs to me that it should be the other way around: I, the local, should be welcoming them, since they come from all over the world and are still finding their way around the English language. But there’s no arguing with their warm greeting, or with the robust aromas wafting through the cottage’s window screens.

After setting down my overnight bag, the air crisp from the downpour that just ended, I take a moment to look at the cottage itself. Dark brown and crooked in all the right places, it blends seamlessly into the glistening foliage encircling it. A motley assortment of bunkies and tents—one of them my home for the coming night—rings the cottage, and just ahead, a narrow, zigzagging path plunges down toward a grassy clearing by a river.

Inside, a flurry of preparations is under way—potatoes being peeled, meat pierced for doneness, cutlery placed on the plastic tablecloth. As befits a cottage, all the action takes place in the living

room slash dining room slash kitchen, with three tiny bedrooms and a bathroom adding little to the square footage. Everyone has an assigned duty except Franceska, a young woman from Haiti, who’s lying on the couch and clutching her pregnant belly. Every once in a while she moans softly. The unspoken agreement in the room, which will persist throughout the weekend, seems to be: Let this weary woman rest.

The women spending the weekend here in this enclave on the York River near Bancroft, Ont., are refugee claimants, awaiting the government’s verdict on their cases. They’re here to get out of Toronto, to put the question that follows them every minute of the day—Can I stay or not?—on temporary hold, and to get a taste of cottage life. It’s not their cottage, of course. It belongs to Sanctuary North, a non-profit organization devoted to bringing refugees and their local hosts together in a community-building, authentically Canadian experience.

The brainchild, in large part, of social activist Lee Creal and her husband, Michael, Sanctuary North got its start when the couple’s church came into some unexpected money and Lee developed the idea of a cottage for refugees. “We wanted a rustic retreat, nothing prettified,” she explained. “The church approved our proposal, we raised more funds and acquired the property, and here we are.” Volunteers and refugees refurbished the cottage, cleared the swimming area, and built platforms for tents, readying the property for its first refugee group in August 2002.

Every summer since, Sanctuary North has partnered with five Toronto refugee centres to send groups to the cottage for short trips. Some groups are co-ed, while others, like this one, comprise only women and children. The refugees aren’t just there as guests, says Creal. “They contribute on all levels, even maintenance, so they take ownership of the experience.” Maintenance loomed especially large this year when a roofer discovered bats, which led to a \$7,500 bill for roof repair and bat removal—a sizable dent, given Sanctuary North’s annual operating budget of \$5,000. “But, hey,” Creal says philosophically, “what’s a cottage without a few critters to keep you company?”

Hosting this weekend’s group are Loly Rico and Francisco Rico Martinez, a contagiously effusive Salvadorean couple who run the FCJ Refugee Centre in Toronto. Refugees themselves when they first arrived in Canada 19 years ago, on a snowy night in mid-January, Loly and Francisco have dedicated their lives to helping refugees and refugee claimants navigate Canada’s complex immigration system and adapt to the country they hope to call home. Holding forth among their charges with a barrage of good-natured ribbing punctuated by belly laughs, they behave more like clucking parents than administrators. There is no way in the world not to like this couple. >>

Leaders on this weekend, Francisco Rico Martinez, a human rights lawyer in his native El Salvador, and his wife, Loly (opposite), were compelled to come to Canada as refugees 19 years ago. Now they run a refugee centre in Toronto, where they try to help claimants feel safe. “When refugees arrive, they’re completely uprooted,” Loly says. “A place that feels like home gives them strength.”





All choose one word for
this weekend: peaceful

Five of the claimants here this weekend hail from Latin America, two from Africa, and one from Haiti. Swaziland-born Ntombi has brought her four-year-old son, Bongani, with her. Her round face shows fine wrinkles, but only at certain angles, making it impossible to guess her age. For the women in this group, the calling card—the shared experience they carry with them wherever they go—is violence. They come to Canada facing the daunting task of proving they’ve been abused, whether for their beliefs, their lifestyle, or just because. The glacier-like speed of the claims process means they will likely spend a year or longer in limbo, wondering whether to put down emotional roots or to steel themselves for a return to abusive husbands, taunting fathers-in-law, or anonymous, threatening phone calls in the dead of night (see “The Waiting List,” this page).

This weekend offers a chance to escape from the worry, the morass of forms to fill out, the intimate details to disclose, all for a shot at staying in this country. The fresh air, novel experiences, and steady pace of activity allow the group members to lose themselves in the present moment—a near impossibility for these women, who talk of being trapped between past and future, between the devil they know and the one they don’t. As expected, cottaging takes many of them by surprise. Precious, hailing from Zimbabwe by way of North Carolina, will later admit she had “no idea what to expect—I thought we would each have our own cottage. Can you believe it?”

The dinner the group worked so hard to prepare is a classic Canadian meal—barbecued roast beef (or “roast cow,” as Francisco calls it), mashed potatoes, and mixed salad. Carolina declares the tomatoes tasteless: “You should try the tomatoes in Chile—there’s no comparison.” Young Bongani has no complaints, though. “This is great,” he says, spearing a hunk of beef with his fork.

Everyone seems to get along in the convivial, egalitarian way that people who share a common enemy—in this case, persecution—often do. I think I’m blending in nicely, until Carolina tells me that I flinched when she gave me her welcome hug. “I did?” I ask, honestly surprised. “Yes,” she says wistfully. “People in Canada are nice, but not warm the way they are in Chile. It’s hard to explain.” As much as she fears returning, she says, she aches for her homeland.

Alicia agrees. With three grown children and seven grandchildren back in Mexico, she tells me that e-mails with photo attachments only go so far. The strain shows clearly in her fidgeting black eyes, in the terseness of her smiles, in the cigarettes she always keeps close at hand. “The pain will never leave my heart,” she says, glancing down at her cigarette pack. “That’s why it’s so hard to quit.”

When I ask the women to describe the unfolding weekend, all choose the same word: peaceful. Franceska, finally coming out of her shell a little, worries constantly about deportation since her work permit expired. “I heard they might have the right to keep my baby here and send me back,” she adds dully, her withdrawn demeanour suddenly making sense. “Sometimes I get so scared I can’t eat.”

{Continued on page 122}

The waiting list

People from other countries can apply for refugee status in Canada if they have a well-founded fear of being persecuted, whether for personal or political reasons. Claimants must prove they would likely face torture, risk to life, or cruel and unusual punishment if they return to their home country. They must also show that these dangers don’t arise from inadequate medical care, that the persecution isn’t embodied in government laws (unless the laws violate international standards), and that their home country is unable or unwilling to protect them.

As 2005 drew to a close, just over 20,000 claims awaited hearings. By the end of March 2009, the number had swelled beyond 58,000. With an estimated two and a half years needed to process the backlog, the gap between pending and finalized claims continues to widen.

Even if they’re granted refugee status, many claimants find it a bittersweet victory. The *Immigration and Refugee Protection Act* excludes family members from sponsorship if they weren’t examined by an immigration officer when the sponsor arrived in Canada. As a result, some refugees face indefinite separation from their children.

The clearing near the small dock is both a spot for doing nothing and the place where Francisco and Loly cajole their group into a morning calisthenics session. Lee and Michael Creal (bottom) spearheaded the idea of a cottage for refugees when their church had some money in need of a worthy project.

