



# OMRA

# Newsletter

Winter 2025

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## Return of the Ten Thousand Villages bazaar generates success



After a six-year pause, the Ten Thousand Villages Sale and Ottawa Mennonite Church Tea Room made a return on November 7th and 8th.

It was a fantastic weekend – so many came out to support fair trade artisans and made it the most successful Ottawa Festival Sale ever.

Meanwhile, OMRA volunteers and grocery card supporters ran the ever-popular Tea Room. Generous bakers and cooks donated homemade bread, hearty soups, and decadent desserts. Those of us serving in the

Tea Room were busy taking and filling orders, cutting bread and desserts, clearing and setting tables, washing dishes, and having a lot of fun and laughter with each other.

Thanks to everyone's efforts, **OMRA raised over \$5,500** for our rent subsidy and refugee support programs.

A heartfelt thank-you to all who shopped, cooked, served, and supported!

OMRA is entirely funded through the generosity of our donors and supporters. To make a tax-receivable gift, go to our CanadaHelps profile: [www.canadahelps.org/en/dn/72150](http://www.canadahelps.org/en/dn/72150)



# Language learning with a fun twist



One of the biggest challenges any refugee faces is language. A few are fortunate to come from multi-lingual regions where English and French are prominent. But for those who have grown up speaking their national language, learning English or French is a challenge. Children, natural sponges for everything, usually out-strip their parents in months, often become the unofficial translators for the family.

For adults, the hill gets steep, very steep! A high school or elementary classroom offers a fuller immersion for kids, but parents don't have that luxury. And with the backlog in language assessments, adults are waiting months or more to gain access to the classes they so desperately need.

This is why OMRA's language tutor program is so important! It's a friendly way for newcomers to practice their language...risk free!

Every Thursday from 4-6, a group of tutors and OMRA clients meets at Elmvalle Public Library. There are usually two tutors and 2-5 learners. It is learning with a twist—they laugh,

share stories and jokes, and raise settlement issues that people are facing. Tea or coffee is brought in, adding to the communal nature of the learning.

Mustafa is an OMRA client who has been here three years. He has become a wonderful tutor and resource to OMRA and our

Sudanese newcomers.

At the same time, our Client Services Manager, Amena, meets with

any of our clients who need guidance for serious problems, sometimes medical, financial or educational.

Language by its very nature is social, and through our wonderful volunteers, OMRA is helping newcomers gain the confidence they need.



## Celebrate A Sweet Season And Help OMRA Out

Generous OMRA friends are heading up a Purdys chocolate fundraiser for OMRA. Please consider joining in. It's easy and you get to enjoy delicious chocolate made with sustainable cocoa certified by the Cocoa Horizons Project.

### Here's how to order:

1. Click the link to go to the Purdys website:  
<https://fundraising.purdys.com/join.aspx/1500749-131926>
2. Enter your email and click "Join a Campaign"
3. Once on the campaign page, click "Shop Online" from the main menu bar on the top right
4. Add items to your online cart
5. Proceed to checkout

Order by: November 26

Pick-up: December 14 in Old Ottawa South

Please email [sportfamily11@gmail.com](mailto:sportfamily11@gmail.com) with any questions



## Hope and resilience

Adam, a newcomer from Sudan, arrived in Ottawa almost two years ago through the Government-Assisted Refugee Program. At 43 years old, with no formal education and little to no English, he faced the daunting challenge of starting over in a new country.

After one year of settlement and financial support under the RAP program, Adam transitioned to Ontario Works. Although it helped cover his basic needs, he found himself struggling – financially, emotionally, and mentally. He was deeply distressed, malnourished, and depressed, constantly worrying about his mother and 10 siblings who had fled the war in Sudan. With limited English and no stable income, he felt hopeless about supporting his family or building a future in Canada.

That's when OMRA stepped in. Through OMRA's rent subsidy program, Adam was able to afford his housing and focus on his English studies without the constant fear of

losing his home. He began attending classes regularly and joined OMRA's tutoring sessions run by dedicated volunteers.

After seven months of support, Adam's progress has been remarkable. He found a part-time job that allows him to earn an income while continuing his education. His confidence has grown – she smiles more often, shares stories from his homeland, and even brings Sudanese coffee, blended with cardamom, ginger, and cane sugar, to share with others as a gesture of warmth and community.

Adam says: "OMRA gave me the tools and support I needed and welcomed me with open arms. Without OMRA's help, I don't think I could have made it this far. Now, I can earn a little, give a little, and stay hopeful that one day I'll be reunited with my family."

Today, Adam is not just surviving – he's rebuilding his life, one step at a time, with renewed hope and a sense of belonging.

## Together we all help

One of the amazing things about OMRA is the fact that virtually all of our fundraising goes to support clients! The more funds we raise, the more rent support we can provide. And with the rapid increase of rental rates the past year, coupled with increased costs of living, providing higher subsidies is becoming more and more frequent.

In today's world filled with strife and hard-to-believe situations we can draw hope from the good that still goes on everyday. Like Mr. Rogers said, when things are bad, look for the helpers. And help is what OMRA does. When a refugee family starts receiving rent subsidies, the joy – and relief – is palpable. It means being able to afford a decent place to live. It may mean not having to manage a household *and* multiple jobs. It means being able to attend language classes or school. It means families are stronger, children are healthier and learning better, and it builds a sense of hope and belonging.

**As supporters and donors of OMRA, this is what you do: have a direct impact on the lives of people.** So thank you from all of us to all of you this Christmas. You help spread the ecumenical good will and cheer, allowing OMRA clients to thrive and be best they can be.

— OMRA fundraising team



**INVITATION TO OMRA**

# HOLIDAY PARTY

Join us for an afternoon filled with snacks, games, laughter, and great conversation – a special time for our OMRA families, volunteers, and friends to connect and celebrate together.

**Date: 29 November 2025**  
**Time: 1:30 to 4:30 pm**  
**Location: 1830 Kilborn Avenue**

## What you do while you wait depends on what you are waiting for

A month or so ago, I met a lovely refugee family of three: a mom, her young adult daughter, and her 10-year-old girl. They recently moved into a tiny one-bedroom apartment and OMRA is providing them a rent subsidy so they can afford this tiny living space.

What impressed me most was the hopefulness they expressed when we met.

The mom is studying English five mornings a week; the young adult daughter is working on her Canadian high school courses (she hopes to get into the medical field) and holding a part time job as well; and the youngest child is adjusting remarkably well in her school, making lots of new friends.

The bond this family has is incredible to see.

They know they need many things, but that wasn't the focus of our conversation. Instead, they shared their dreams and plans: what they are doing – and are going to do – to make those dreams come true. They arrived in Canada escaping chaos with nothing, but they absolutely know that they have been given a gift coming to our country. They are not to be deterred!

Hope inspires dreams, and actions make dreams come true. This family is dreaming but working with focus and determination to make their dreams a reality.

They inspire me.

— Donna Rietschlin, November, 2025

## Extending OMRA's reach

Rent Assist Allies (RAA) is a project operating under OMRA which offers rent subsidies and trained volunteer supports to help stabilize families that are at risk of homelessness. Similar to OMRA, RAA aims to support families on a path to self-sufficiency but RAA is conceived to support a wider range of needs beyond recent newcomers and refugees.

RAA is pleased to report we have accepted our first family for subsidy and support. Our recipient is a recent arrival in Canada, with two children under 5 and a third on the way. She was a practicing veterinary doctor in her home country and is trying to get her credentials recognized here. She recently a short stay in a shelter and then moved with her family into a one-bedroom apartment. She registered for a veterinary technician

course, but is struggling to find child care.

We are excited to support her in her aspirations to return to her profession in veterinary medicine and become financially independent.

## Temple Israel

Temple Israel and Merle's Friends are continuing to support the OMRA Grocery Card Program

In 2019, Temple Israel members sponsored a Blended Visa Office-Referred (BVOR) refugee family – a mother and her young son. When their first year of resettlement support ended, they asked OMRA to provide a rent subsidy so they could continue assisting the family.

Since then, Temple Israel congregants (and "Merle's Friends") have become enthusiastic participants in the OMRA Grocery Card Program.

As one member put it: "We all have to eat, and it feels like free groceries when you use a prepaid card!"

OMRA extends warm thanks to everyone at Temple Israel for your continued generosity – and we look forward to welcoming even more participants in the months ahead.





# Waiting for asylum

*In this challenging international world full of strife and turmoil, many people are choosing to take the dangerous and uncertain step of seeking asylum in a “safer” country. (The official term is refugee claimant). The UNHCR estimates that in 2024, over 8 million people world-wide were claimants. OMRA has been assisting an increasing number of claimants over the past few years.*

Most of OMRA’s clients arrive as refugees through private or government sponsorship programs. This means that upon arrival, they have certain rights and responsibilities. But some of OMRA’s clients are people seeking asylum in Canada. They do not come as “official” refugees, which means they have to apply to stay after they arrive. Canada’s asylum rules are stringent – applicants must demonstrate a well-founded fear of persecution in their home countries. Those whose applications fail must leave or be deported. Applications can take 2-3 years to be heard, which can mean years of living without the same level of support and access to services refugees receive. Applicants may receive some government supports, but it is far from adequate.

Ella (not her real name) came to Canada in 2023 and immediately began the process of applying for asylum. She had left her home

country because of persecution from the state and family members. She arrived with her three half-Canadian children (her late husband had Canadian citizenship). The children are doing well in school and getting proficient in English. But Ella gets only a few hours of English instruction each week and receives half the money to live on compared to a sponsored refugee. It is a struggle for them. Ella and her children are all undernourished, with food bank visits limited to just once per month.

In face of these troubles, Ella is optimistic and hard working. She is grateful that OMRA helps her with her rent, even if the apartment



is small and crowded for 4 people. Her OMRA tutor says she is a delight to work with – so eager to learn and to become independent.

Ella is waiting for the day she can become a permanent resident, master English and become a Canadian citizen.

# With OMRA waiting is never passive

It's late in the year: gardens are put to bed, clocks are turned back, and we wait – sometimes in bitter darkness, sometimes in hopeful anticipation while always yearning for the breaking forth of light and peace.

For Christians, this waiting takes the form of Advent, anticipating the celebration of Christmas and the arrival of hope, joy, and love. For our Jewish friends, it is the light of Hanukkah. For our Muslim, Hindu, and secular friends, it is a time of gathering, of food and family, and of preparing for celebrations that lift our spirits during the colder, darker months.

Some of the vignettes in this newsletter share what our newcomers, refugees, and asylum seekers face – and what they do while they wait for safety, stability, and peace. Other stories highlight what OMRA volunteers do to bring light and hope into the lives of our clients during uncertain times.

We hope you enjoy these heartfelt reflections and the photos that accompany them. May they remind us that waiting is not passive; it is full of courage, action, and the small, steady gestures that create community.

## Teams at work

Even as we look toward better times, OMRA's work continues quietly and steadily each day. Waiting is never passive here – it is a time of preparation, support, and strengthening.

Our OMRA Client Services Manager, Amena, is a new (since May 2025) and extraordinary

blessing to both the Board and our clients. She walks alongside families as they navigate difficult health, employment, financial, and educational challenges – serving not only as our CSM but also devoting many hours as a dedicated OMRA volunteer. She brings a deep understanding of our clients' needs to Sherpas and Board members and ensures that newcomers feel they truly belong to OMRA.



## Thank you for supporting us!

Because the needs of our clients are great, the OMRA Board is constantly striving to do the very best for them. This includes ongoing fundraising as we work to increase the resources needed to meet the growing demand for both subsidies and the amount of support each family receives.

Our long-standing grocery card fundraiser continues to be a lifeline, with OMRA receiving 5% of bulk grocery orders. We are deeply grateful to the many people who buy their monthly groceries through us, and we feel a genuine closeness to each participant – many of whom have followed

our clients' stories through the monthly vignettes we include with the cards. Thank you to every individual buyer and to the coordinators who organize group purchases.

Bev and Kevin Davis spearheaded the Purdy's Chocolate Fundraiser and wrote articles for two community newspapers. You can still participate too! (*See page 2 for details.*)

After receiving an appeal from OMRA, the Grey Sisters of Pembroke reflected on our mission and concluded that our goals align closely. They kindly offered a generous donation.

Similarly, after we met with members of the Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association executive, they facilitated a generous contribution supporting our work with refugees.

The Ottawa Mennonite Church volunteers and many others helped OMRA's Ten Thousand Villages Tea Room raise over \$5,000.

And a big thank you to Aries Contracting for continuing to be a generous supporter.

We are so grateful for the creative fundraising initiatives by OMRA members.

As you can see, what people choose to do while they are waiting is, overwhelmingly, acts of kindness – steady, hopeful, and deeply encouraging.

And sometimes, what we do while we wait is simply enjoy being together.

— Maria Rigby,  
OMRA Board President