

Developing friendships here and abroad

Tripp, Colleen

By Andy Johnson

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"I want to write to you to say thank you very much for helping me and the other Kosovars in Trenton and Kingston. You are very nice lady and you have two beautiful daughters. You are more than welcome if you like to come and visit us."

This letter, from a Kosovar refugee who stayed in Trenton, is a glowing reference to Colleen Tripp — most loved by the people who she's touched.

Tripp volunteers with the Quinte United Immigrant Service, the United Way, and she has given her time generously to the Red Cross. She has forged many friendships with the people she has worked with and those she has met along the way.

Tripp began volunteering with the Red Cross in May, 1999. Her mother was helping out with Kosovar refugees displaced by war in Yugoslavia, who were staying at CFB Trenton. The Blessington resident, and mother of two, was inspired and decided to get involved.

Tripp, who is a full-time administrative assistant at Human Resources Development Canada, focused her efforts on the children who were staying at CFB Trenton. Her husband and two daughters also became involved in the international relief effort. They would pick up groups of kids and take them swimming... have them to their home for a barbecue... or play basketball with them... whatever they could do to help.

On one occasion they had 19 kids with them. She said it was impossible to leave the base with a small group. She said the youngsters would flock to them, grabbing their arms and begging to be taken along. The affection, the kids showed to the volunteers, was one of the greatest rewards, said Tripp.

One of the most important tasks the volunteers performed was simply trying to make the displaced refugees feel comfortable in an unfamiliar

environment.

"Just familiarizing them with Canada and some of our customs here, just trying to be friendly. I guess that was the biggest thing. When you think that they came from a war zone, what they really want to see is a friendly face."

Despite the difference in language, the Tripps became close with many of the families, establishing strong relationships which continue today.

"It was amazing," said Tripp. "There were lots of times they didn't speak English and I sure didn't speak Albanian, but I can't remember a time when we couldn't communicate."

Although most of the Kosovar refugees are no longer in Trenton, the Tripps are still in contact with many of those who have left. They regularly communicate with families who are now living all over Canada and some who have returned to Kosovo.

One young Kosovar, Toni, has returned to his home country. He regularly writes and expresses how much he misses the Tripps and how grateful he is for what they've done.

"I came to Canada about six months ago but it seems like six years. We landed on CFB Trenton where we stayed for three weeks and where I met lots of people, one of them now is my most exalted friend whose name is Colleen," Toni continues to describe what he calls 'a short story of our friendship' in his most recent letter from Kosovo. "I kept in touch with my most exalted friend and we still talk for hours on the phone because we love each other," he concludes warmly.

Tripp now volunteers her time with the QUIS in Belleville. She sits on the board of directors and assists refugees and immigrants in a more formal capacity. Some of the families she helped through the Red Cross have returned to settle in the Quinte

area.

Tripp — along with many other volunteers she is quick to add — has helped them find housing, language training, and jobs, among many other services the organization provides.

Tripp stresses that what she has done is not an individual effort. She could not do any of it, she said, without the support of her family, friends, and other volunteers who freely give their time and energy.

In the Quinte area alone, there are 145 volunteers working with two full-time staffers at QUIS out of the Bridge Street location. These volunteers and staff assist over 700 clients in Quinte, from all corners of the world, including Nicaragua, El Salvador, Poland and China. The organization has been in operation in Belleville since 1986, and became recognized as a non-profit organization in 1987. Since then it has become a major help to newcomers to the Quinte area.

The services provided by the QUIS are targeted to those who are isolated because of culture and/or language. One of their primary goals is to educate and encourage the community to respect the diversity of immigrants. They accomplish this through educating people on the value of racial and cultural differences.

The organization also partners with other local groups, such as the Three Oaks Women's Shelter and the Sexual Assault Centre, in an effort to assist the needy. They are engaged in Community Economic Development specifically to minority groups who desire increased access to services and the creation of new services presently not available in the community.

QUIS serves an area from Brighton east to Napanee, and from Prince Edward County, north to Bancroft. The organization relies on federal and provincial funding for its survival, as well as money donated by private benefactors.

Anyone interested in volunteering their time with the QUIS is asked to call 968-7723.

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