



# Second IRCOM House to open

*Feds, province praise IRCOM model, commit \$9 million to second facility*

“This kind of partnership gets real results.”

With those words, Public Safety Minister Vic Toews announced the biggest step forward for IRCOM since its founding 20 years ago – the creation of IRCOM House 2.

Journalists, government officials, members of sister agencies, and staff shoehorned into the program room at IRCOM House on Dec. 21 to hear Toews and Premier Greg Selinger announce the two governments would spend \$9 million to transform a pair of Manitoba Housing apartment blocks on Isabel Street into transitional housing for newcomers.

Both men praised the IRCOM model, which is focused on families and meeting the needs of all family members. Toews, noting his own grandfather settled just a few blocks from Ellen Street in 1925, said getting off to a good start has always been critical for newcomers.

“Finding safe and affordable housing is a challenge for many people, but especially those arriving in a new country and culture,” said Manitoba’s senior Conservative MP.

He called the new facility “an investment” before adding, “What a great way to welcome newcomers to our city.”

Selinger called housing “a fundamental requirement for immigrants beginning a new and successful life in Manitoba” and noted most new arrivals find employment within six months and many become homeowners within a few years.

“We need more housing for newcomers because we are bringing in more immigrants than we ever have in our history,” said the premier. “This will

give them a good start with safe and affordable housing.”

Of course, most IRCOM House residents are refugees – many have limited or no English, and just escaped war and other upheavals in their homelands. But executive director Dorota Blumczynska noted IRCOM is working with government and other funders to provide the same level of support and programming to residents of IRCOM House 2.

“In the spirit of rejuvenation and new beginnings we extend a warm invitation to all of IRCOM’s supporters to take this journey with us as we work to transform this vibrant community,” said Blumczynska.

People and their passion for helping others are at the heart of the IRCOM model, said board chair Lindsay Ward.

“Beyond our board, who have been totally committed to this initiative from day one, our staff of 32 is supplemented with an amazing community of over 80 volunteers,” said Ward. “These incredible people have contributed their time and energy in many ways, such as helping newcomers learn and improve their English, assisting children in homework clubs or even spending time at a soccer pitch, supporting the youth. They have fulfilled the role of welcoming the newcomers in our midst.”



**THE WHOLE CREW:** IRCOM staff get up close and personal with Public Safety Minister Vic Toews (centre), Housing Minister Kerri Irvin-Ross and Premier Gary Selinger (both on right) following the announcement of IRCOM House 2.

## The project

IRCOM House 2 will be located in two Manitoba Housing buildings on Isabel Street between Ross and Pacific Avenues. Both were built around 1980, one is a seven-storey tower comprised mostly of bachelor suites while the adjacent three-storey low rise has two-bedroom suites. The main floor currently houses a daycare and Northern Star Originals, a First Nations and Metis women’s co-op which makes star blankets.

The new location will allow IRCOM Inc. to open an additional community resource office that will be open to all community members. The upgrade of the buildings will create flexible suite configurations for a range of families, from single parents with one child to those with 10 members. The building requires extensive mechanical, electrical and other upgrades. Work is slated to begin in March 2011 and be completed in 2012.

The new location will have programs comparable to the original IRCOM House and staff will be working with the Boys & Girls Clubs of Winnipeg Freight House club and other agencies in the Centennial community.

# Easygoing but always moving

*Newcomer has two jobs, four teens at home, & English classes, yet still finds time to volunteer*

By Rachel Derksen

**S**uad Omer first came to Winnipeg three years ago, and has been a welcome addition to IRCOM for the past two. She recalls that arriving here in October was a big shock – the cold a sharp contrast to both her very hot homeland of Eritrea, and to Sudan, where she lived before moving here.

Recently Suad assisted a neighbour with English, teaching her to write numbers and accompanying her to the bank. This has become something of a regular occurrence for Suad: she especially enjoys helping out others from her home country, seeing room for support and springing into action. Her approach is collaborative and friendly – building community through taking the time. “I like to help the people,” she says with a smile. “This is my character. Helping people is my habit.”

Before coming to Canada, Suad was a secretary in the engineering department at the National Electricity Corporation for 17 years. She hopes to gain a similar position here, once she's gone back to school and added English to the three languages she speaks fluently: Arabic, Tigrinya, and Amharic. For now, she keeps busy as a child

minder at Victoria Albert School, attends English classes, and has a cleaning job at Manitoba Hydro. If that wasn't enough, she also has four teenagers in the house and another son in Vancouver.

Suad has become a key member of the IRCOM community through her caring demeanour and kind gestures. Still, she is much more eager to talk about the selflessness of others than her own involvement. She is very grateful to the IRCOM staff for the work they do. She speaks enthusiastically about Meghan Pesclovitch, the volunteer English partner she met with weekly this past year. The two got along very well – not surprising given Suad's easygoing personality.

Another habit of Suad's is visiting with friends and neighbours, usually over coffee.

“That is one culture from Eritrea,” she explains. “If you have a guest, you make for him first coffee. We take the time together. We speak together, talk together. The ceremony of coffee gives time to people to speak together and to stay together.”

*Part of an ongoing series to highlight the contributions of IRCOM volunteers.*



**Volunteers in Action**



Suad Omer



## Who are you?

My name is Erna Andersen. I come from Denmark, and I have been living in Canada for two and a half years – so I'm a newcomer, too. I am the new Community Resource Development Worker at IRCOM.

### When you're not working here, what do you like to do?

I knit and I crochet. I like to sit at home, either in front of the TV or with music, and watch my hands produce something. It's a therapeutic thing for me. I love finding nice yarn and making something out of it, for me or mostly I've been doing stuff for my friends' kids. I've also developed this technique to recycle plastic bags that you get from the store, to crochet a nice shopping bag out of plastic bags. And I always like to read. I like music – my husband plays the banjo, he's a full-time musician.

### So are you a musician too?

No, I'm a social anthropologist. I have pretty much all my work experience in Afghanistan, where I have been working and visiting on-and-off for the past seven years. I've been doing development work, mostly in development research – the different projects that exist, and what they mean to the Afghan population.

### What is your role now that you're at IRCOM?

You know, I'm just figuring that out myself! The development worker position is still being developed. Overall my role is to strengthen the community resource program. CRP's role is to welcome and accommodate the needs of the tenants here. I am updating the tool kit that explains how to deal with the people moving in, and the visits to follow up on the tenants' settlement process here. And then at the same time I'm helping out with the day-to-day cases of people coming in. What I've enjoyed the most so far has been getting to know the tenants. I can't update the tools or practices we're doing if I don't understand the background and context of the people who live here.

# Winnipeggers experience a new culture ... without leaving home

*City residents show immigrants the ropes through program that matches up families*

By Carol Sanders

Reprinted courtesy of the Winnipeg Free Press

As the province announced a record number of newcomers came to the province last year, a program put the call out to Friendly Manitoba families to spend time with some of those newcomers this summer.

"The early times are very difficult," recalled Habtamu Wedajo, who came to Canada four years ago. He now works for IRCOM House and is hoping to pair 12 newcomer families with well-settled Winnipeg clans.

One of the families hoping to be befriended just arrived in Canada in March.

Kewal and Gita Basnet and their one-year-old daughter Loria are among the 3,214 newcomers who arrived in the first three months of 2010 – a 12 per cent increase over 2009.

The Nepalese refugees from Bhutan speak English, Hindi and Nepali. Kewal was a science teacher, Gita a sociology major. They enjoy reading books and newspapers, visiting new places, listening to music and meeting new friends. They're living in IRCOM (Immigrant and Refugee Community Organization of Manitoba) House, the 67-suite transitional residence for newcomers near the Exchange District. Kewal volunteers there in the maintenance department and the community resource program.

They're hoping to be part of the "family to family" program this summer. It started last summer with just six families, said Wedajo.

"We thought it would be a good experience welcoming newcomers, and a learning experience as a Canadian family that would help out with their adjustment to Canada," said Gayleen Dimond. The Wolseley resident and her husband and three kids aged 20, 11 and 3 were matched with a family from Congo.

"People don't know how to make friends and find jobs," said Andre Lulinda, the oldest child in the Congolese family befriended by Dimond's family. Having a relationship with people who are established in a community helps, he said.

"That can make us, as newcomers, to be confident and feel more comfortable about this country," said Lulinda, who's graduating from Grade 12 this month.

"We got to learn from the Canadian family," said IRCOM House resident Emita Mahamat. She and her husband have four children



**ROCKIN' OUT:** Letegebriel Sium, Alysha and Trent Sloane (2010 partner families) lead their children through a tableau exercise, showing the group how much fun they had playing rock band together.

ages 10, 8, 6, 4 and are expecting their fifth in August.

They learned from their new Canadian friends what to do with their kids.

"In my country, we leave the kids to play," said the woman from Chad. "Around here, you have to keep your children inside."

Mahamat's family was befriended by a Winnipeg family with four children. They showed them the ropes and introduced them to parks. They remained friends after the summer program ended, she said.

"We'd go to the park in the winter and go sliding," said Mahamat. "The children would go to the movies together." Now, with a baby on the way, she's getting moral support from a fellow mom: "She said 'You don't have family here. I will help you.'"

The woman takes Mahamat's kids for a couple of hours every so often. "I can get a break," she said.

"The best thing is we still have a relationship with our family," said Dimond.

## So what's your family doing next summer?

Recruitment for Family-to-Family 2011 is getting underway and we invite your family to join in the fun. Sipping Eritrean coffee with new friends, visiting a Hindu Temple, and attending Folklorama are just a handful of activities last year's families enjoyed. No special skills or talents required; just a desire to make new friends and an interest in welcoming a new family to Winnipeg are needed. For more info, contact Erin at [erina@ircom.ca](mailto:erina@ircom.ca) or 943-8765.



**ALTONA BOUND:** IRCOM Ambassadors Jing Zhang, Noma Sibanda, Mumtaz Mirza, Faiza Hargaaya, and Genet Kassaye enjoy the beauty of the Pembina Valley during a brief break between presentations.

## Seeing newcomers in a new way

By Lori Penner

Reprinted courtesy of the Altona Echo

Have you ever wished you could hear the untold stories in your community?

Several Grade 7 and 8 classes at Parkside School got that opportunity on Oct. 1 when they had a visit from a group of ambassadors from the Immigrant and Refugee Community Organization of Manitoba (IRCOM).

The organization operates transitional housing in Winnipeg for newcomers as well as after school programs, and is home to 67 families from countries around the world.

The six-person team represented the countries of Pakistan, Ethiopia, Oromia, China and Zimbabwe and were at Parkside School as part of an outreach program that educates youth and adults about immigration and promotes inclusion and awareness. Their presentation was part of a tour through Altona, Winkler and Morden made possible by a grant from Welcoming Communities Manitoba.

Their focus is building awareness around the realities of being a new Canadian.

Driven by their passion to give newcomers a voice to promote and protect themselves, the group highlights the important role newcomers play in Canadian identity. They attempt to eliminate stereotypes by sharing personal stories of their own experiences in moving to a new country. Coordinator Erin Anderson says they do about three tours a year, and they get a lot of positive feedback from kids and adults alike.

"We try to create safe environments where newcomers can share their experiences and give others a chance to connect with them," she says.

"One way to connect is by helping people understand some of the struggles newcomers face."

They do this is through discussion, object lessons and games. The ambassadors had the students participate in an activity called Scramble for Wealth. Basically, a bunch of pennies were scattered on the floor, and the students had to pick up as many as they could. The clincher was that many of them wore mittens, were blindfolded or had their hands tied behind their backs. Others were given a magnet to pick up the pennies, which didn't work.

"We do this exercise to teach people that often when you're new to a country, it's hard to make a living," Anderson says. "Sometimes you don't know where to go (blindfolded), or you don't have the skills or resources (hands tied) or you do have valuable resources (magnet), but they don't work in your new home."

In the group discussion, students were asked questions which dealt with certain misconceptions about newcomers.

They were asked things like: what level of education do most newcomers have? (Bachelor Degree), what is the top job most immigrants have? (welder) and what country did the majority of newcomers come from last year? (The Philippines).

Students were also taught to listen by telling each other their own stories.

"We live in a multicultural country," says Jing, a group member from China.

"Kids need to be aware of that, and learn more about other cultures to avoid discrimination," she says.

Lori Sawatzky, executive director of south central settlement services couldn't agree more.

"The message this group brings is for all ages, which is why we had them come out," she says.

## Ellen Street Insider

Ellie hasn't been her usual upbeat self lately because of the looming departure of **Abdikheir Ahmed** (pictured below). Abdi arrived in Winnipeg (via Somalia, Kenya, and Halifax) in 2005 and has been the coordinator of the After-School Program since 2006. Whether inspiring a child to keep trying at school or scrapping together funds for small training programs to give teens an alternative to gangs, Abdi has had a deeply personal impact on the lives of many, many people. Of course, Ellie always loved how Abdi could quiet a room full of raucous kids with a penetrating look and a wag of his finger. This man, who Ellie calls "my greatest Manitoban," heads to Brisbane Australia in January to take his masters degree at the University of Queensland. ... Another major loss for IRCOM came in December with the departure of **Marcie McMillan** (also pictured), a children & youth worker who has also touched the lives of many young people in the past four years. We are all wishing her the best in her new adventures and hope she stops in for many visits ... All this has Ellie grumbling about all the new names she's needed to learn. There are three new faces in the Newcomer Literacy Initiative (teachers **Manuel Zuniga** and **Jen Glenwright**, and NLI coordinator **Krista Law**), **Fitsum Getahun** is the new Asset Building Program coordinator, and **Garry Neufeld** joins us as Newcomer Housing Project manager. Rounding off the crew of newbies is development worker **Erna Andersen** in the Community Resource Program. ... Although currently on maternity leave, you probably recall **Noëlle DePape** from her natural habitat, the IRCOM office. Ellie is thrilled to announce the birth of Noëlle and partner **Lindsey McBain's** son, **Rupert Azim DePape**. Rupert entered the world on July 24th, 2:02 a.m., weighing in at 8 pounds. Everyone is looking forward to years of 2 a.m. birthday parties.



## The Plug *Help us welcome new Canadians*



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