

Our Syrian Refugee Family

Update July 20, 2017

Transcript of Patrick and Lisa Attardo's Speech at Catholic Charities Volunteer Recognition Awards Event Recently

(Patrick)

My name is Patrick Attardo and this is my wife Lisa Attardo. We are Parishioners at St. Thomas More Catholic Church in Oceanside. Our Parish heard the call of Pope Francis, last year when he challenged every Catholic Parish in Europe to adopt a Syrian Refugee Family.

We thought "Why just Europe?" This challenge belongs to all Catholic Parishes in the United States as well. So, we heard and accepted the call!

In January of this year, our Parish received word from Catholic Charities that "Our" family had arrived in the US. A family of seven, a father and mother with 5 children ages 21 to 4.

We were excited to get started in our sponsorship role. We looked to Catholic Charities hoping to find some type of "how to guide". We were reassured sponsorship is not that structured, you simply meet with the family, ask them what their current needs are and if you can provide them great! If they ask for anything too "over the top" just contact Catholic Charities and their Social Worker will explain the sponsors are there to help them meet the basic needs until they can get on their feet. It sounded fairly straight forward.

Catholic Charities arranged the first meeting with the family in their apartment. A translator was provided, since the family spoke very limited English and we spoke no Arabic.

(Lisa)

I am never comfortable going into a new situation without some prior knowledge. Before meeting the family for the first time, I wanted to have some understanding of what they had been through and anticipate the type of needs they may possibly have. So, I did a little research on my own.

To be honest, I had no prior knowledge of the process of what a refugee entering the US goes through. Beginning with life in a refugee camp, the extreme vetting process, being accepted by a resettlement agency, and having to obtaining a travel loan for their airfare. When they finally arrive in the US they are moved into an apartment that has been completely set up and made ready for them by their resettlement agency. Welcome to America!

Also, the resettlement agency has a huge responsibility to these families and a small amount of funds and time to make it all happen. Finding housing and getting it furnished often with very little notice is just the first step. The next 90 days is a race to get them social security cards, health insurance, English and cultural classes, teach them the bus system, enroll children in school and get their welfare established just to name a few.

After spending several late nights of reading everything I could find on the refugee crisis and sponsorship, the day of meeting "our family" had arrived. Our welcoming committee consisted of Patrick and myself, our Pastor, Fr. Mike Ratajczak and Sr. Maureen Brown. On our drive to El Cajon to meet the family, I

read from my notes to share with the others in our group what I had learned. Wanting to be respectful to their Muslim culture, we decided it would be best if we let Patrick and Fr. Mike do the talking.

(Patrick)

The family welcomed us with open arms! We were invited into their home and given the best... and only seats in the house at the kitchen table. His daughters waited on us and made sure we felt welcome. We quickly learned that the women of the family talk as much as the women in my family!!

We introduced ourselves and said we would like to help in some way, but we are not sure of your needs. The fathers immediate reply was "... you can give me a fish or teach me to fish..." He went on to say he was an accountant in Syria, however, he would drive a taxi here if it meant he could provide for his family. He really wanted a job and a car to get there!

Wow, a car and a job – I think we were hoping to start out with a simpler needs list; like toothpaste and toilet paper!

Fr. Mike replied, we will see what we can do, we will ask our Parishioners, in the meantime, do you have any immediate needs? Fortunately, we had a list we brought along of common things refugees need when they first arrive Lisa had found on the internet, and with the help of the translator were able to get the first needs list put together.

(Lisa)

Our sponsorship journey had begun, from there we would visit every 2 weeks and try to take more items down to them and come back with a new list of what they needed. We would publish the lists of items they would request on the Parish website and in our bulletin. Parishioners that had those items would drop them off at the church.

Our Parish was so caught up with this family's story, everyone wanted to do something to help. We started to receive several duplicate items. Some folks felt bad if they did not have one of the items on the list and would donate gift cards and cash. Others signed up to drive them places, tutor them, pay their bills. The response was overwhelming!

(Patrick)

It wasn't long before the father would take me to neighboring homes and introduce me to other refugee families that did not have sponsors. They would see us bringing so many things to one family. The father would ask if there was any way we would get help for them too.

We contacted Catholic Charities and told them we had other families approaching us for help. They confirmed these families had no sponsorship or in some cases the families were sponsored, but, perhaps by a single person that could help in a limited way.

(Lisa)

We were told we were the first Parish, and at the time, the only Parish in the Diocese of San Diego to sponsor a family. No other Parish had done this. This was a first for Catholic Charities.

They had not seen such generosity showered on one family and it was difficult to see when there were so many that had none. We were asked if we would consider sponsoring more families.

Although our Parish was not able to make that commitment, we were able to commit to giving all of our duplicate items to Catholic Charities and are working on establishing an ongoing relationship with Brother Benno's in Oceanside to provide furniture, appliances and clothing to other newly arriving refugee families.

(Patrick)

Just two months into our relationship with our family, tragedy struck. Their middle child and only son drowned while at his first trip to the beach with his friends.

This was another first for Catholic Charities. We were not sure what to do, we were so attached to this family, we just knew we needed to be there to support them. There was no precedence for this. Catholic Charities said they had dealt with weddings and births and medical emergencies, but never a death of a child.

So, we all did what felt right as Catholic Christians. We spent a lot of time with them and supported them through their grief. Catholic Charities also had a Case Manager at the house every day and helped them work with the search and rescue teams and emergency crews and provided the necessary translation.

Sadly, in the end, we attended the funeral at the Mosque with a group of Parishioners from our church on Easter Vigil night.

(Lisa)

And yet the sponsorship journey still had more in store for us. Due to the sensational way their child passed, it raised a lot of awareness to the needs of the family as well as the needs of all refugee families. Something good from something tragic.

And before we knew it, the family now had two more sponsors working on the same needs list!

Yet another first for Catholic Charities.

Through many phone calls, e-mails and meetings we were able to identify who the sponsors were and all come together as a team that will be able to care for this one family and help a few others as well.

Due to the level of generosity of donors, items being donated far exceed the basic needs list. Along with that came the next lesson of sponsorship... What you may give to a refugee receiving welfare benefits and what you may not!

We had no idea when we entered into this journey there would be such a learning curve!

(Patrick)

What impact has this had on us as a Parish and would we do it again?

Our Parish fell in love with this family from the beginning. After their son died, they came to celebrate Mass with us. They were overwhelmed by the love they felt from our Parish.

It was the first time that they experienced a Catholic ritual, and for many of our Parishioners, it was the first time they had a chance to meet and greet a Muslim family.

The family came to Mass with Imam Taha Hassane and his family, and Fr. Mike invited Imam Taha to the ambo where Imam Taha spoke to the entire assembly to thank us for our generosity, and even more importantly, he shared about what it means to be a Muslim in America today.

Fr. Mike talks to us a lot about us needing to be more faithful and less fearful, and for our Parish, sponsorship of this family has allowed us to practice that.

The journey we thought we signed on for had more twists and turns than we ever could have imagined but we would not have missed it for anything.

(Lisa)

Where are we today?

We have learned the most important lesson of sponsorship. The greatest gift of all any sponsor can give is a hand up to get the family self-sustaining as soon as possible. Thank you to Nadine at Catholic Charities for your patience in needing to teach us that lesson more than once in this process.

As a sponsor, you see the family struggling and it is easy to keep giving them the fish. However, it is not the best thing. They need to be moving towards becoming self-sustaining as soon as possible.

We are 4 ½ months into our 1 year sponsorship. Yes, the father did get a van and we have hired a private tutor that will have him fluent in English in 2 months' time with a company ready to hire him as an accountant once he completes his studies. Our sewing group has purchased the mother a sewing machine and fabric and soon she will be on her way to fulfilling her dream of becoming a clothing designer, and all 4 children have college scholarships. All will be self-sustaining, productive, US citizens.

As for me personally, the lessons learned about the refugee crisis has enlightened me and I know I will remain involved with this cause.

I have a huge amount of respect for what the Catholic Charities staff deals with on a daily basis, I have seen them in action, and it is very impressive! To witness what they do every day, makes it clear to me sponsorship is critical to fill the funding gap.

My hope is our sponsorship journey will encourage other Parishes to sponsor a family. Catholic Charities is making miracles happen every day, but they cannot do it without the help of sponsorship!

For more information visit www.stmoside.org/OurSyrianFamily or contact: Lisa Attardo at lisaattardo@yahoo.com or 760-884-7863; Patrick Attardo at 760-844-7862 or Sr. Maureen at 760-758-4100 x131 or maureenb@stmoside.org.



I was a stranger and you welcomed me...