

# Starting over

## Wyatts minister among refugees in Canada, helping to meet physical and spiritual needs

**A**ngelic Jeanty remembers the sounds of a helicopter circling her house and the image of immigration officials arriving at her door. She gathered her three children and fled. Although she and her husband, David, had lived in the United States for 14 years, they were being forced to flee — again.

The Wyatts partner with the Furniture Bank of Ottawa to resource refugees.



The couple first arrived in the United States in 1992 as political refugees from their homeland of Haiti. They had made several stops in neighboring countries before arriving in the United States as refugee claimants.

David, a youth pastor, and Angelic, a nurse, began making a home for themselves in the United States while their status in the country hung in the balance. Two years after arriving, officials told them they could not be classified as refugees because they had overstayed their visas while waiting for their claim to be heard. Then, when amnesty was offered to several groups, they were allowed to stay. The events of September 11, 2001, affected immigration laws, and once again the couple's status was in jeopardy.

In 2008, the Jeantys received a call from immigration telling them they must leave the country immediately. When David asked what he could do, he was told that his file would be sent to a judge and he should wait for the decision. So he waited. And then, unexpectedly, the officials arrived at his door.

Because they knew it was still unsafe for them to return to Haiti, the Jeantys started all over again in Canada, losing everything they had but each other.

CBF field personnel **Kim and Marc Wyatt** have heard numerous stories like the Jeantys. After September 11, the United States began turning away refugees, and Canada began allowing refugees to enter the country.

The Wyatts' ministry is focused on being the presence of Christ among refugees and encouraging churches to do the same.

"It's the right thing for churches and Christians to do, to be on the right side of justice, even if it puts us in a difficult place with our own country," he said.

"We see it in the Bible," Kim said. "We see where we are told to love the alien. To love those who are indeed strangers. We're asked to invite them in and to treat them like brothers and sisters."

## Welcoming the stranger

When the Jeantys first crossed the border into Canada, they learned about Mat-



**(Top)** Many refugees arrive in Canada with few possessions and need basic home furnishings, such as beds. **(Above)** Kim Wyatt teaches international students, sharing information, resources and opportunities.

thew House, an organization that provides refuge to newcomers. Matthew House has become a movement in Canada, bettering the lives of refugees and immigrants by providing a safe space to live, helping them find jobs and assisting with immigration paperwork. The ministry follows the

admonition of Matthew 25 to welcome the stranger as it helps people start over.

The first Matthew House started in Toronto to provide refugees an alternative to the government shelters that dealt with chronic homelessness. Now there are five Matthew Houses with additional locations in

Fort Erie, Windsor, Ottawa and Montreal.

Matthew House has been crucial for people such as Andrea from West Africa. Like the Jeantys, Andrea came to Canada as a refugee claimant. She left her homeland after experiencing severe abuse by her family and receiving multiple death threats from her in-laws.

“It’s like a family house,” Andrea said after her first week, grateful for the meals and clothes provided by volunteers. “People here are very warm.”

## Making a house a home

Starting over in a new country is a long process. While Matthew House is often the first stop, eventually, newcomers need help getting established in a place of their own. The Wyatts began the Furniture Bank of Ottawa to complement the work of Matthew House by collecting donated furniture and giving it to newcomers who are setting up an apartment in Canada for the first time.

The Furniture Bank provides an important way for churches to participate in welcoming newcomers. It’s also a way for the refugee to fulfill the Canadian government’s service requirement for those seeking refuge. Matthew House residents volunteer at the Furniture Bank, getting a glimpse into the future as they imagine setting up their own house one day.

Inspired by the needs of refugees, Marc started the Furniture Bank by responding

to the need of a church in Ottawa that wanted to provide furniture for a Haitian family with no money to buy a bed. Marc went to yard sales and asked if he could have their leftovers. Soon, the ministry grew too large to be housed in the Wyatt’s carport, so it moved into a donated truck trailer. Eventually it outgrew that space and had to relocate to a large corporate warehouse donated by a local company.

“Since that time we’ve been able to go from serving a few families a week to serving as many as 10, 15, even sometimes 20 families a week,” Marc said. “There’s now upward of 7,000 to 8,000 people that have been served because one church had a need they knew they couldn’t meet by themselves.”

## Meeting spiritual needs of newcomers

In their work welcoming newcomers, Kim and Marc have recognized that meeting material needs alone is insufficient. Refugees and immigrants also come with spiritual needs. This fuels Kim’s work as a volunteer chaplain at a local adult high school.

With a background in education, Kim felt the opportunity to work at the school was a perfect fit. She said her role as chaplain allows her to minister among students who are dealing with difficult issues.

**Marc Wyatt, left started the Furniture Bank of Ottawa out of his carport.**



“Often these conversations turn personal and deal with family, being alone, being homesick or wanting to talk about spiritual things,” Kim said. “I have opportunities to share and often to pray with people who are from different religious backgrounds or have no faith at all.”

One day, not long after Kim started as chaplain, a 20-year old refugee from Burundi came to her office. She wanted Kim to help her start a Christian club at the school. Together they started the club which attracted 30 students to its first meeting. The students were surprised so many people came. Each thought he or she was the only Christian in the entire school.



CBF PHOTOS

The Wyatts visit the homes of refugees, offering emotional and spiritual support.



## Imagining a welcoming world

The Wyatts are working to make their dreams of a more welcoming world a reality through their diverse ministries.

“Imagine what a different place even our streets or our communities would be if we

would love the alien,” Kim said. “Imagine what it would be like if we would seek to love others as brothers and sisters instead of living in fear of those who are different.”

The Wyatts’ dream could not be a reality without the support of Fellowship Baptists.

“When you give to the [CBF Offering for Global Missions](#), you’re making it possible

for ministries to open doors to the lives of those with broken hearts and lives,” Marc said. “You’re making it possible for people to find the Lord and to find hope in places that you may never see or go. We think this is a holy thing.”

*By CBF communications*

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