



The Man Who Saved 200 Syrian Refugees

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Jim Estill put up \$1.5 million to bring 58 families to Canada. He found them homes, gave them jobs and even bought one man a dollar store. How the mild-mannered CEO of an appliance company became the Oskar Schindler of Guelph

When Jim Estill decided to sponsor 50 Syrian refugee families, he didn't tell anyone about it at first—not his accountant, not his friends, not even his wife. It was the summer of 2015, and the death toll in Syria had reached a quarter of a million people, while another

four million had fled the country. All summer long, the news reported horror stories of Syrians drowning in the Mediterranean. Humanitarian aid programs were being cut across the Middle East.

As he watched the news, Estill got worked up. “I didn’t want to be 80 years old and know that I did nothing during the greatest humanitarian crisis of my time,” he says. Estill was disturbed by the wave of xenophobia that had emerged during the Harper administration. He wanted to demonstrate how refugees could help enrich our society. One of his best friends, Franz Hasenfratz, was a refugee who fled Communist Hungary. Hasenfratz went on to establish Linamar, a car-parts manufacturer, which is Guelph’s largest employer, with nearly 10,000 employees. “I was trying to drown out the xenophobes,” Estill says. “When we think of Italians or Irish, we don’t think of them as immigrants. They’re just people.”

So he did some math. He checked Kijiji to find out how much apartments in Guelph were renting for, googled child tax benefits and GST/HST rebates in Ontario, and formulated a monthly food budget. He estimated that \$30,000 could support a family of five for one year. He multiplied that number by 50 and realized the total cost—\$1.5 million—was one he could easily afford.

Editor's Letter



Estill is the CEO of Danby, an appliance company with annual sales of \$400 million. He got his start reselling computers out of the trunk of his car in the late '70s in Waterloo. He eventually took over as CEO of Synnex Canada, an information technology firm, where he grossed more than \$2 billion in sales each year. In 2015, he came out of semi-retirement to take over as Danby’s CEO. Estill is both pragmatic and dogmatic, spreading his no-nonsense business gospel at every opportunity. He even has a Ted Talk—it’s called “From Zero to \$2 Billion.”

At 59, he looks more like a cop than a flashy executive, with his spriggy grey moustache, dishevelled hair and winking grin. Instead of bespoke suits, he wears functional shoes and patterned shirts with the collar open. He and his wife, Elizabeth, a retired lawyer, live in a grey-brick Victorian hidden from the road by a thick wall of trees; his four grown children moved out years ago. He drives a red Prius, which he calls his mid-life-crisis car. “It’s red, isn’t

it?” Estill is almost annoyingly disciplined: he doesn’t own a TV and spends his free time reading marketing books, which he reviews on his blog. He runs on a treadmill most mornings, often works 12-hour days and religiously tracks his steps on his FitBit; on a good day, he’ll do 20,000. Outside of work, his main passion is gardening. When we had lunch together, he served me a salad made with tomatoes, beans and beets that he grew himself, topped with salmon he’d caught on a fishing trip to B.C.

Estill has codified his life into a set of what he calls “success habits.” Some of them are very specific: spend 20 minutes outside every day, no matter the weather, and have a “creative oasis” where you can do your best thinking (one of his is a rocking chair by the fireplace in his basement). Other maxims are much broader, like do the right thing—a principle that figured prominently in his decision to sponsor Syrian refugees.

After Labour Day, Estill called a slew of local religious organizations—including three churches, a mosque, a Hindu temple and a synagogue—and aid agencies like the Salvation Army. On September 29, 10 civic leaders sat down in Estill’s boardroom at Danby. He’d made a PowerPoint presentation titled *Refugees: The Right Thing to Do*. Muhammed Sayyed, the president of the Muslim Society of Guelph, was amazed that so many faith groups were participating, even though most of the refugees would be Muslim. When he met Estill, he was filled with gratitude. “I thought, Wow, there are still people like him,” he said. An hour after the group sat down, the project was launched. The Muslim Society of Guelph would create the infrastructure, handle the paperwork and lead the volunteers. Estill would sustain the program with monthly donations. The group partnered with the Islamic Foundation of Toronto, which was a sponsorship agreement holder. This meant Estill could choose which refugees he wanted to sponsor.

On November 24, 2015, a story about Estill’s project appeared in the *Guelph Mercury*. Within days, the article had been translated into Arabic and circulated in the Middle East. Refugees who’d spent years trapped in limbo in Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey were suddenly seeing Estill’s face in their social media feeds, along with the promise of a quiet life and stable employment. Soon, they started emailing him directly, pleading with him to bring them and their families to Canada.

In the beginning, he received just a few scattered messages. “Let me introduce myself,” they wrote. “I lost everything.... I can work.” In the following months, the letters kept pouring in, first by the hundreds and then by the thousands. “Mr. Jim Estill,” one man began, “we are Syrian family now we are in Jordan as refugee we want help to get in Canada we have 2 cousin was killed by Syrian government and we have 1 brother missing and 2 brothers detained...please Help us.”



FACTORY LIFE Jim Estill has created a program called Ease Into Canada, which provides Syrian refugees with jobs at Danby and regular ESL lessons. He’s pictured here with four of his protégés (from left): Fida, Youssef, Mohamed and Kawa

E still is prototyping an ambitious sponsorship program that he hopes will grow into a full-scale humanitarian movement. He wants to show other wealthy businesspeople across the country how they can front the money, set volunteers in motion and use their professional networks to find jobs for refugees. “If you can run a company with 800 employees, then you can run an organization with 800 volunteers,” he says. He has a clear definition of success for the program: 50 families who work,

pay taxes, buy their own groceries and speak English. “We’re not encouraging them to be dependent on us,” he told me. “You’re not doing anyone any favours if you just hand them cheques.”

Before he could bring anyone over, he needed to get many other Guelphites on board. Within a month, more than 800 people had flocked to the cause. There were teachers, doctors, warehouse managers, construction workers. Many Vietnamese boat people who’d arrived as refugees in the ’70s and ’80s showed up to repay the generosity they’d received. Jaya James, a Christian woman affiliated with the First Baptist Church, took six months off her job as a policy advisor with the Ministry of Agriculture to help organize the project. About half of the volunteers wanted to stay in the background—sorting through goods, canvassing for donations, securing accommodations—while others hoped to work directly with the refugees in settlement groups dedicated to each family.

Estill organized the volunteers into eight teams, each led by a director and an assistant director. Every team addressed a different aspect of the newcomers’ needs. A director of mentors would advise the people who’d be working with families. A director of finance would administer the budget for each group and hand out the monthly cheques, which varied from \$1,100 to \$1,500, depending on the size of the family and the cost of their accommodations. Other teams managed education, health, food, jobs, transportation and housing.

Estill’s most active partners were Muhammed Sayyed and his wife, Sara, from the Muslim Society of Guelph. Sara started out as Estill’s director of mentors, but, over time, she was promoted to be the hands-on leader of the entire operation. Her title is now director of directors, and she makes sure that all of the volunteers have the support they need. Her husband, Muhammed, a former immigration consultant, does the paperwork for the refugees before they arrive, and helps them find and settle into jobs. If Estill is the mover, Sara and Muhammed are the shakers.

Related



One of the biggest challenges Estill encountered was finding places for the refugees to live. Most families find homes in university campus buildings,

high-rise apartment buildings and low-income housing projects, but it isn't always enough: Guelph's vacancy rate is 0.6 per cent, lower than Toronto's. Late last fall, Estill approached a local developer and offered to finance new housing. In March, he had an office building refurbished as eight residential units for refugee families, and he's working on retrofitting other mid-rises across town.

While Estill was organizing housing, his team was receiving more donations than they knew what to do with. Estill relied on the Salvation Army to handle the contributions, but even they were overwhelmed by the sheer number of items. He eventually rented a warehouse space near Danby to store all of the furniture, dishes, car seats and clothes. It's a large, windowless room that looks like the world's messiest thrift store. The inventory changes constantly, but, at one point last spring, it included 295 comforters, 120 dish and cutlery sets, 77 electric kettles, 57 pillows, 56 irons, 28 coffee makers, 20 slow cookers and 18 toasters. One room at the back is filled with nothing but toys.

Choosing the first 100 refugees was the easy part: many Syrians who already lived in Guelph begged Estill to help them bring their families to Canada. Some of the other spots were taken by people lucky enough to email Estill soon after the *Guelph Mercury* story came out. As the requests continued to flood in, Estill was faced with an excruciating Sophie's Choice, making life-and-death decisions about who he could save and who he couldn't. "Their stories tugged at my heartstrings in every way," he says.

He focused on applicants he thought were most likely to succeed in Canada: families with someone available to work and earn money. He was often forced to exclude seniors and singles. "I had to play God," he told me, his voice cracking with emotion. "It was like encountering a thousand beggars. Who do you help? How do you choose who starves?"

After much deliberation and many sleepless nights, the final number came to 58 families, or about 220 individuals. As the refugees began to arrive, they told Estill about the relatives they wanted to bring to Canada. He could never bring himself to say "no." He writes down every name he gets, hoping that, somehow, someday, he'll find a way bring them all here. With each family that arrives, his list gets longer. Last time I checked, in late November, it contained more than 200 names. Everyone who comes to Canada has family members stuck in limbo, struggling to survive. Estill is their best hope.



A BRIGHT FUTURE Youssef is a 32-year-old former car salesman from Damascus. He's shown here in the Quebec Street Mall, a shopping centre in downtown Guelph where Jim Estill has bought Youssef a dollar store franchise

The story of Canadian refugee sponsorship is a tale of two Trudeaus. In 1978, Pierre established the private program as a way for Canada to accept more refugees when Vietnamese boat people were fleeing their country en masse. Private citizens could fund the people that the government

couldn't. Over the next two years, Canada brought in 60,000 new arrivals and, since then, has continued to assist approximately 6,000 people every year.

Estill launched his project just as Justin Trudeau promised to bring 25,000 government-sponsored refugees to Canada. The momentum picked up dramatically as thousands of Canadians hastily put together private sponsorship groups to match the government's pledge. Most volunteers thought the Syrians would arrive within weeks and scrambled to make sure they were ready to welcome their newcomers. But the process has bottlenecked, and many sponsors are still waiting for their refugees to arrive. Caseworkers at Winnipeg's refugee-processing centre can't keep up with the number of applications they're receiving. The Liberals have added more staff, but the average processing time is still 43 months for privately sponsored refugees, which isn't much help if the goal is to assist people who are in immediate danger. By the time many Syrians get here, they will have waited in camps for three or four years.

Among the first of Estill's refugees to arrive in Canada was a woman I'll call Nadeen and her three kids—14-year-old Alem, 13-year-old Maha and six-year-old Naya. Like many Syrians I spoke to, she fears reprisal against her relatives back home and only agreed to speak to me if I used pseudonyms. Nadeen came from Bariqa, a small town in Syria, where she worked as a school headmistress and her husband was a lawyer. In November 2012, their village became a front line in the war between President Bashar al-Assad's military forces and the insurgent armies. They escaped to Damascus, where Nadeen had family. She took a temporary job at a school. Over the course of two weeks, she witnessed three cars explode on her way to and from work. After two months, the family drove across the border into Turkey, where Nadeen tried to earn a living churning and selling cheese, while her husband shovelled coal. When he lost his job, he paid smugglers to help him flee Turkey in a small plastic dinghy, leaving Nadeen and their kids behind. He ended up in Austria and promised to send for his family when he could.

Three months after he left, Nadeen heard about Estill's program through one of her brothers, who had moved to Guelph before the war started. Estill believed that, with her brother's family here for support, Nadeen was sure to succeed. Within three months, she found herself in Guelph, where she was welcomed by a group of sponsors who sheepishly call themselves the

Superfriends. They couldn't afford to sponsor their own refugees but jumped at the chance to work with a family through Estill's project.

The Superfriends found Nadeen and her family a home in a small housing project at the University of Guelph, designed for students with families. There's a shared yard lined with children's bicycles and plastic toys. She's decorated the house in bright colours. When we met, she sat on a bright pink armchair that matched her fuchsia hijab. The family's blue budgie was chirping in the cage by the window.

Nadeen's son, Alem, started Grade 9 at the public high school this fall; her daughters attend the Meezan School, an elementary school based in the Muslim Society building. They already speak English remarkably well. Their main tutor was Will Smith in *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*—someone gave the family a DVD set of the show, and they watched it on a loop in the months after they arrived. Nadeen keeps an open mind about Canadian culture. She enjoyed Thanksgiving and loved helping her kids dress up for Halloween. She recently started working part-time at the University of Guelph, helping international students settle into Canada. She no longer calls herself a refugee and prefers to say she is a new Canadian. "But one day I'll be a real Canadian," she tells me.

Nadeen and the Superfriends are working to bring her husband to Guelph, but it could take a year or more before he gets there. In the meantime, the couple chat on the phone for at least five hours a day. He greets the children every morning and often video-calls in at breakfast on their iPad, which sits propped up in the centre of the kitchen table.

More refugees slowly trickled in through the spring and summer: two families in May, two more in June and two more in July. Among these arrivals were a 31-year-old Kurdish man named Mohamed and his 22-year-old nephew Kawa, both tailors from Aleppo. They told me how, in Syria, men have only two options: death or conscription into Assad's army. Syrian men often escape separately from their families, because they are more likely to be targeted on the road. Mohamed and Kawa left Aleppo on their own in 2011 and landed in Turkey, where Mohamed was reunited with his wife and child. They spent nearly four years there. Living in Turkey was extremely difficult for them. "No one respected us," Mohamed explained. "We couldn't work." Another man I met, Fida, had lived in Homs, which was Syria's third-

largest city before it was reduced to rubble in the war. In 2013, as the fighting got worse, Fida left his job as a mason and escaped through the desert to Lebanon with several men from his neighbourhood. They chose a spot between two military checkpoints and made the 50-kilometre trek en masse.

When the first refugees arrived, Estill found that many of them lacked the necessary experience or mastery of English to get hired at Guelph's factories. He established Ease into Canada, a program at the Danby warehouse in which newcomers can get jobs, train to work in a factory and study English. Any Syrian who applies—even if they're not one of Estill's refugees—gets a job at Danby as part of the three-month program, either as a warehouse handler or working the returns line. The program offers flexible schedules and in-house ESL classes twice a week. Mohamed, Kawa and Fida are all members. "We are so grateful to Mr. Jim Estill," Kawa told me. "God be with him."

While visiting the Ease into Canada program, I met a 32-year-old worker whom I'll call Youssef. He studied English in university and possesses a sharp wit. Back home in Damascus, he had a good job as a car salesman. He drove a Kia, lived in a nice apartment, had girlfriends. When the war broke out, he managed to get a tourist visa for Egypt and immediately left for Cairo.

"I feel like a coward because I left Syria," he said. "Real men in this situation would stay. Like my dad. He refused to leave."

In Egypt, Youssef met a Canadian diplomat, who helped him get his refugee status card from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. He heard about Estill's program on social media. Normally, Estill wouldn't sponsor a single man, but he was already sponsoring Youssef's cousin, so he agreed to include Youssef as well.

He arrived in July and lives in an apartment with two Canadian roommates and a pet rabbit—"In Syria, we eat rabbits," he deadpans—and he takes a bus to work at the Danby factory every morning. The City of Guelph gives the refugees a free transit pass that they can use during their first year in Canada.

As spring turned to summer, the flow of refugees slowed to a trickle. Estill was left with a warehouse full of clothes, furniture, dishes and other goods,

and no one to give them to. He decided he didn't have to hoard all of the donations until the refugees arrived; he could start giving away what he'd gathered to Guelphites who needed things right away, with the expectation that more would be provided when it became necessary. He was right. Weeks after Estill cleared the warehouse, it filled up again with new donations.

Jim Estill Tedx talk



In the fall, the rest of the refugees finally started arriving in increments of one or two families each week. By late November, there were 38 refugee families in Guelph, with 20 more expected to land by the end of the year.

On the first Saturday of every month, Falahat Sheikh, the director of food, hands out meals to the refugees at the Danby warehouse. She works with a Syrian woman who has taught a group of volunteer cooks how to prepare kibbeh, a traditional dish made with lean ground beef, bulgur and spices. Sheikh and her team also give each family a 56-litre food hamper full of staples like pasta, Middle Eastern spices and canned goods.

When I visited at the beginning of November, Sheikh was greeting the families as they arrived. Two refugees helped distribute the food: Ahmad, who's a car mechanic from Homs and now works for \$15 an hour at an auto-body shop; and Tony, who got a job as a cook at an Arab restaurant. Tony is Christian and wears a gold crucifix on the outside of his heavy grey sweater. He pulled out his phone to show me pictures of his kids: triplets, aged two

and a half—two girls and a boy huddled in a bright plastic wagon. Tony and his wife had tried for six years to have children and ended up with three all at once, born less than a year after they escaped Syria into Lebanon.

At one point, a middle-aged mustachioed man arrived in jeans and a sweatshirt, and offered to help Ahmad unload the vans. Ahmad asked Sheikh who he was. “That’s Jim Estill,” she responded. Ahmad was astonished—the friendly guy who’d helped him unload boxes was the multi-millionaire who’d saved hundreds of people. Estill hung back while the volunteers worked, handing out apples that he’d picked up at the farmers’ market. “Do you know who that is?” Sheikh asked each refugee. As soon as they realized this was the man who’d helped them come to Canada, their faces broke into wide grins. One by one, as they came to the door, they’d touch their chests repeatedly in gratitude or throw their arms around him. A few kissed him on the cheek. Many asked to take pictures with him. Estill gamely posed for the photos, then resumed handing out apples. He was just another volunteer.

Later that day, a new arrival stopped by the warehouse. He’d come to Canada just three weeks earlier and was still billeted at the home of one of the volunteers, who’d driven him to the warehouse that morning. He had been a pizza chef back in Syria and, the previous day, he’d made and sold pizzas at the Muslim Society. When he arrived, Estill pulled him aside. They huddled together for 15 minutes. Afterward, Estill came back beaming. “We’re doing it,” he said. “We’re going to set him up with a pizza business.”

Estill finds jobs for people when he can and, wherever possible, helps them start their own businesses. He’s opened a line of credit for Youssef to buy a vacant dollar store franchise and stock the inventory. “When I told him the hours would be long, he said he could do it all himself. That’s how I knew he would be successful.” The owners, Tom and Katharine Lammer, are friends of Estill’s and have agreed to only accept rent after Youssef has made a base salary. Estill believes that Youssef will make \$100,000 a year or possibly more. One afternoon, Youssef and I took a walk down to the mall to visit the dollar store that would soon be his. He beckoned me to another store called The Dragon, where a group of teenage boys were playing a fantasy card game. He flashed a mischievous grin. “Maybe Jim will buy this store for me, too?”

He was kidding, but Estill's devotion to his refugees knows no bounds. He volunteers with them, talks to them on Skype and mentors them in the factory. Right now, he and his wife are hosting a pair of elderly parents and their 37-year-old daughter in their own home. "By living with them, helping them learn about Canada, waiting for appointments, I see what their lives are like. I see how different our customs are. I hear their stories," says Estill.

The biggest challenge, he admits, is the demand on his time. When I ask him how it's going, a look of frank exhaustion crosses his face. "It's been intense," he tells me with a sigh. And yet he won't quit. Every day, all he can think about is how he can bring more refugees to Canada and how to motivate other businesspeople to join the cause. He's met with Immigration Minister John McCallum and Guelph MP Lloyd Longfield, pressuring them to raise the caps on immigration. "I know we're doing something good, but I'm never satisfied," he told me. "I've helped 200 people. Now I'm thinking about the next 200."

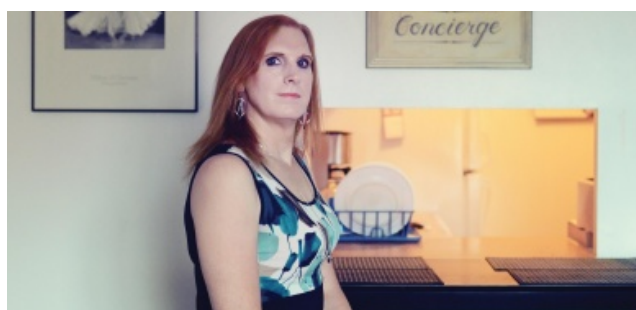
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