



CANADIAN CENTRE FOR VICTIMS OF TORTURE

COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

CCVT aids survivors in overcoming the lasting effects of torture and war. In partnership with the community the centre supports survivors in the process of successful integration into Canadian society, works for their protection and integrity and raises awareness of the continuing effects of torture and war on survivors and their families.

ADDRESSES:

Downtown office:

194 Jarvis Street, 2nd Floor Toronto, ON.
M5B 2B7
Tel: 416-363-1066

Scarborough Office:

2401 Eglinton Ave. E., Suite 310 Toronto, ON.
M1K 2N8
Tel: 416-750-3045

The Hub @ Victoria Park & Eglinton:

1527 Victoria Park
Toronto, ON. M1L 2T3
Tel: 647-847-2334. 647-847-2335

Mississauga office:

130 Dundas St. E. Mississauga, ON. L5A 3V8
Tel: 905-277-2288

Palace St. Office:

20 Palace St, Toronto, ON. M5A 0J4
Tel: 416-364-184

Disclaimer: The CCVT Connections, is fueled by the following goals: to engage volunteers in important events, news and meetings. In doing so, it acknowledges the vital role they play in fulfilling CCVT's mandate. It is published quarterly. The information provided in this publication is not controlled by the CCVT, and therefore, may not reflect the Centre's views, staff and team.

EDITORIAL COMMITTEE:

Huda Bukhari, Ismail Elnour, Ari Barbalat



We are still physically distanced but socially connected!

Message from the Community Engagement Program

As we continue to work virtually and improve access to our clients' services across the city, to their counselors and doctors, we start thinking of all those refugees across the world who are impacted by the COVID-19 virus. Ari Barbalat, CCVT volunteer and Connections editor has kindly shared information as to their plight.

You will read in this issue the impact of mentoring a client, how CCVT Counselor, Rahel Gebrechristos is settling in at work; and learn of happenings at CCVT, an interview with CCVT's Child/Youth Counselor, and articles from our editor, Ari Barbalat.

Thank you to all volunteers who had donated through our GoFundMe page. Gift cards have been distributed to 132 children, youth and seniors through this endeavour!

Know that we, at the Community Engagement Program are here to support you, so keep in touch!



INTRODUCING: Rahel Gebrechristos, Settlement/Child & Youth Counsellor

My name is Rahel Gebrechristos. I joined the CCVT family in February 2020 as a Settlement and Trauma Counsellor (Amharic and Tigrigna speaking). Currently I hold the position of Settlement/Child & Youth Counsellor. Growing up, I saw my mother's disgust with injustice around us and saw her in her own way fighting injustices. Unbeknownst to me, the idea of fighting injustice was inculcated in me. Growing up in Ethiopia we had a brutal dictatorship; as most people my age, I left my country and became a refugee in Sudan and then for a very short period in Italy. Then, I came to Canada as a convention refugee.

I got my B.A. in Sociology and Women's Studies from York University. I have worked as a counsellor with women and children who fled abusive relationships and as a counsellor with people who were homeless. Supporting clients, children, youth or/and adults in their settlement journey in their new home, gives me a tremendous satisfaction.



MENTEE: Zac Schraeder:

This is a lengthy message, but it details a CCVT success story!



A few years ago, I signed up to be a mentor at CCVT. Mbalu Lumor ran the volunteer training session I attended. I was really moved by her charisma and passion. Thank you for that experience - it affirmed my decision to volunteer.

Shortly after that session, I was paired with someone named Ahmed Abduljaleel (he goes by Ahmed Moneka), a refugee from Iraq. He was on the older end of the mentee age range, but was paired with me because he was a seasoned actor, filmmaker, musician, and activist. I work with students at a film school, so it was a great pairing! Part of the reason why he is a refugee is because he advocated for the Iraqi LGBTQ+ community through his art. As a queer person myself, I was deeply touched by Ahmed's commitment to allyship and social justice. He is truly amazing.

Ahmed and I met frequently to build connections, develop a personal website, get his banking in order etc. We attended some of CCVT's events and hung out frequently. He swiftly became a member of Toronto's thriving arts community and has made quite a name for himself as a resident performer of Arabic jazz at

Toronto's Drom Taberna. He has also performed for some of Toronto's premier music and arts institutions. He has since become a permanent resident (nearly a citizen!), gotten married, and recently welcomed his daughter, Sina, into the world. This is all a testament to his work ethic, patience, and persistence.

Shortly after Ahmed came to Canada, his own family in Iraq was displaced and had to re-settle as refugees in Eastern Turkey. News of Ahmed's TIFF screening spread in Iraq and his own family began to receive threats similar to the ones that caused him to seek protected person status in Canada. So they had to flee. His biggest priority and dream has always been to have his family join him in Canada. Ahmed has tirelessly fundraised, saved money, raised awareness, and worked on the appropriate documentation to have them come here.





Recently Ahmed notified me that his family has finally made it to Canada as refugees with a short pathway to permanent residence, are out of quarantine, and can start their lives together. This would not have been possible without initial support Ahmed received from CCVT. It is not limited to just mentorship, but also through the community and mental health support that CCVT provided. I know he is thankful for it, as am I.

In addition to sending this update, I want to thank you and CCVT for providing me with this profoundly rewarding, emotional, humbling journey with Ahmed. We would not have met without you! He has become such a source of inspiration and hope for me. We love each other and are true, lifelong friends. In light of this most recent news, I am overcome with a deep sense of joy I did not anticipate when I attended that first volunteer meeting at CCVT. Though Ahmed's journey has been full of stress, immense patience, and struggles, it has also been full of joy. Not once was he ever hopeless.

I know that organizations like CCVT depend on funding to function, which I'm sure involves keeping track of and communicating success stories. Please consider this one of them! If communicating this in any other way would benefit CCVT, please let me know. I want to shout this story from the rooftops in whatever form might be most beneficial for you.

I have included some photos. One is from our paint night together at CCVT a couple of years ago and another is of Ahmed with his family (mother, father, two sisters)!



HAPPENING AT CCVT: CHILD/YOUTH PROGRAM:



The Youth Network program has been a highlight for many of our youth service users providing a safe space to learn about important settlement resources which help to reduce isolation, discuss relevant issues, build community, and develop new skills. The youth have been so excited to continue connecting throughout COVID-19, and share how they have been coping as well.

One recent success was when one of the youth in session had started to talk about how they have been feeling so isolated and lonely due to COVID-19. The other youth participants started comforting the youth and letting them know that they weren't alone in feeling this way. This was a great peer to peer moment within the Youth Network that really captured how providing a safe virtual space for the youth is extremely beneficial for them to stay and feel connected to one another at this time.

The Youth Ambassador Program has also been continuing virtually. This program is a peer-led program where the youth facilitate the discussion and presentation for that session. This program has proven to build relationships within the group, help participants become familiar with online video platforms and worked to reduce isolation. For many newly arrived youth, accessing these activities has also helped to strengthen their relationship with CCVT, in turn, enhancing opportunities to access.

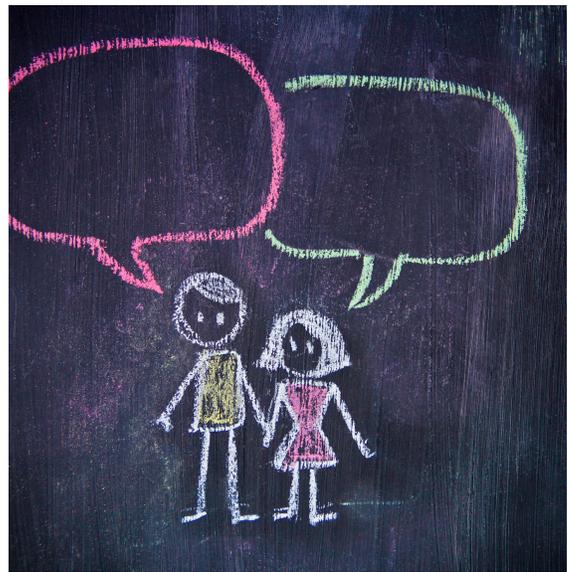


In the month of December, we also hosted two separate virtual holiday/end of the year parties, for both the children and youth. With the support from a few of the CCVT volunteers, we created interactive and engaging activities to celebrate the holiday season as well as virtual raffles. We had a great turnout in both programs!

Homework Club, which has been our longest running and most popular program, is sadly, not conducive to an online platform. In order to adapt, we are now offering our clients the opportunity to be matched with a personal volunteer for one on one tutoring at their convenience. Together the counsellors and the community engagement team source volunteers from our pool and hold an initial session for everyone to meet and to share CCVT's cyber rules and regulations. Afterwards, they set their own schedules. We have received a lot of touching feedback from parents and volunteers alike regarding the program's success.



In the late fall we piloted a virtual computer coding class on Zoom called Coding with Kids. Aimed at children 8 to 13, it ran for three sessions and was facilitated by a long time CCVT volunteer who had recently completed a course as a Web Developer and was eager to share their skills with our community. The program also received excellent feedback and we have plans to host it again in the new fiscal year. The children's programming at CCVT has historically included Toronto based community partners. Since the onset of COVID-19 we have relied on these collaborations to also become virtual to encourage creativity and connection with our young clients. Most recently we have been treated to a dance workshop by the Sharing Dance initiative from the National Ballet School of Canada. We are also in the midst of a series of drawing lessons by Vibe Arts. Both organizations have visited us in office over the years and we are excited by these creative endeavors.



Leah McDonald, Child/Youth Counselor
Nadia Umadat, Child/Youth Counselor
Rahel Gebrechristos, Child/Youth Counselor



REFUGEES & COVID-19

ARI BARBALAT, *Connections Editor*

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, refugees must be integrated as part of the solution to the global coronavirus pandemic. The initiatives of thousands of refugees around the world who work as nurses, doctors and public health outreach workers working on the frontlines cannot be overlooked.

Most national routine immunization programmes' infrastructure is set up to allow cold chain management to the point of vaccine administration, but the existing cold chain equipment is inadequate to handle the COVID-19 vaccine currently available. However, it is expected that more COVID-19 vaccines will be approved including those that can be managed with normal cold chain systems already in place.



Blocking refugees, displaced people and non-nationals from vaccination plans carries the risk of continued transmission in these communities. It also risks spillover into the broader population.

Jordan, for example, has started to vaccinate refugees. Integral to its national COVID-19 vaccination plan, anyone living in Jordanian territory, including refugees and asylum seekers, can receive the vaccine free of charge. In the months ahead, Jordan plans to vaccinate 20 percent of its population against the virus. Jordan has acquired three million doses of the vaccine to bring this about.

Since the pandemic started, refugees in Jordan have been included in the national response plan. They have been able to access health care and medical treatment on par with Jordanian citizens.

Source: Tim Gaynor, Q&A: Including Refugees in the Vaccine Rollout is Key to Ending the Pandemic. January 14, 2021.
<https://www.unhcr.org/news/latest/2021/1/5fff1afe4.html>



REFUGEE CONTRIBUTIONS TO FIGHTING CORONAVIRUS

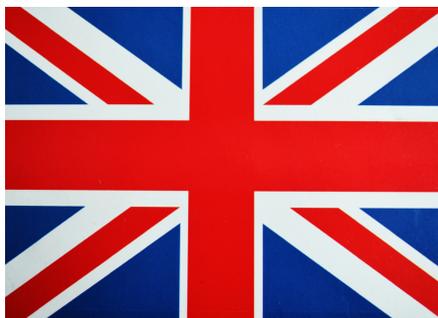
ARI BARBALAT, Connections Editor

International news about the impact of COVID-19 on refugees has emphasized the tragedy of the disease in its stimulus of geopolitical crises as aggressive countries have been distracted by the pandemic (i.e., Azerbaijan attacking Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh), in its spread among vulnerable refugee communities (i.e, Syrian refugees, Eritrean refugees, etc.), and in its catalyzing domestic strife in Ethiopia, the United States and beyond. Without negating these traumas, and without avoiding the tragic closing of the doors of asylum to refugees in trouble due fears of the epidemic spreading, thinking solely about these aspects of the disease contributes to the problematic stereotype that refugees are dependent and passive, unable to pro-actively respond to their situation without external help from aid organizations and governments. What may be learned by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees live blog is that refugees around the world have in fact been pro-active responders to the coronavirus pandemic.



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It is problematic to label refugees as dependent and passive for the following reasons. One, just because someone is passive and dependent, does not mean that these are inherently faults. As resilient as refugees are in the face of horror, passive is a synonym for patient and dependent is a synonym for cooperative. Two, as the blog stresses, refugees around the world have done remarkable deeds of kindness to help the desperately needy. Examples of refugees going beyond the call of duty to help local responses to COVID-19 include the following:



London, United Kingdom

Hassan Akkad fled war in Syria four years ago and found safety in the United Kingdom. Keen to give back in the COVID-19 outbreak, he joined cleaners disinfecting wards at a London hospital. Thank you Hassan.

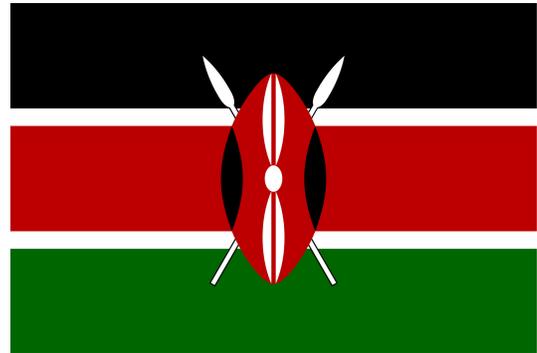


Kakuma Refugee Camp, Kenya

Business is brisk for a young entrepreneur in Kenya's Kakuma refugee camp, where increased demand for hand soap has seen him boost production of his aloe vera-based products.

Iten, Western Kenya

Refugee athletes know what it's like to live in crisis and how sports can help. Their advice during lockdown is to make use of opportunities that present, do what you can, and above all, 'keep on going.'



Bilbao, Spain

Last year, a Basque community welcomed five refugee families from Syria. As Spain battles the coronavirus, several Syrian children sketched rainbows and thank you notes for the medics risking all to save lives.

Iran

Around the world, refugees are using their skills to help the communities where they live during the coronavirus crisis. Moyehman is an Iraqi refugee nurse working 12-hour shifts in the COVID-19 quarantine ward of his local hospital.

One of UNHCR's partners in Iran has brought together female Afghan refugees and women from the local community to produce face masks for doctors and nurses working on the front lines of the COVID-19 response.





San Francisco, Ecuador

In a remote corner of Ecuador, a young Venezuelan doctor called Samuel has been visiting isolated communities to teach elderly locals and refugees most at risk from COVID-19 how to protect themselves against the virus.

Turin, Italy

As COVID-19 continues to wreak havoc in Italy, one organization founded by a former refugee is helping newly arrived refugees in the city of Turin. The organization delivered food, diapers, feminine hygiene items and more to help people during lockdown.



Australia

Many refugees in Australia who are trained healthcare workers are asking their host country to let them join the battle against COVID-19. Their qualifications were fast-tracked so they can do their jobs now, when the country needs them.

The significance of the above is to highlight that refugees are active participants in their local societies. It also highlights that labelling refugees as helpless overlooks how much self-help and help-to-others they engage in all over the world.

Source:

Live Blog: Refugees in the COVID-19 Crisis. <https://www.unhcr.org/news/stories/2020/4/5e79e2410/live-blog-refugees-covid-19-crisis.html#>

INTERVIEW: LEAH MACDONALD: CCVT CHILD & YOUTH SETTLEMENT COUNSELOR



Q: How have you been managing yourself during this time and how have you been staying proactive?

A: I am learning new ways everyday to manage my time better but what I have found the most helpful is staying organized with to-do lists and staying on top of client referrals and case notes. It was a difficult transition to work from home at the beginning, and there still are daily struggles, but overall staying positive and open to change has been the key for me.

Q: How are you attaining work-life balance and productivity as you work from home?

A: It has been very important for me to attain work-life balance by taking the allotted breaks and signing in and out at the appropriate times. I try to go outside for a daily walk (which has been difficult during this chilly February) and spend time connecting to friends and family virtually. I also find getting a good sleep to be very important to my productivity. I also try to get in some stretching or yoga a few times a week as well.

Q: How are you adjusting to this new normal?

A: This new normal definitely took some time adjusting to and continues to have its challenges. This includes figuring out how to best meet the expectations of our clients as well. We want to make sure we are there for them in the same capacity as before, or more so due to the challenges that COVID-19 has brought on. Working as a team and sharing with other counsellors what works and what doesn't work, has made it easier to find that "new normal".



CLIENT SUPPORTS



Q: How do you keep in touch with your clients working virtually?

A: I keep in touch with my clients virtually through phone calls, emails and ZOOM. Service users can always reach out to me or the office through phone, and upon request, will be scheduled for an appointment.

Q: What issues are your clients facing?

A: As the Child and Youth Settlement Counsellor, my clients are under 29 years of age. Many of the children and youth have been experiencing heightened isolation due to COVID-19 and virtual learning. At the beginning of COVID-19 we saw refugee hearings being postponed with no new date in sight, people losing their jobs, and the bureaucratic systems in place becoming even more difficult to navigate. From applying to EI or Ontario Works, to trying to navigate a new school system, existing barriers became impossible and support and advocacy was needed more than ever.

Recently, I was supporting a youth who had been referred to CCVT to receive ongoing counselling and to build their community connections. The client had their refugee hearing scheduled before COVID-19 and had found out their hearing was postponed. Also, due to COVID-19, they had lost their job. I supported the client by assisting them to apply to EI. The client was feeling even more isolated because they were stuck in their home. We worked together on creating a settlement plan that included building connections and connecting with other youth to combat their isolation. The client started attending the Youth Network Virtual Program which included information sessions on topics such as healthy relationships, Covid-19 benefits and housing. As they became more comfortable in our virtual space for programs they really started to connect with the other youth. The client also received their G1 licence by preparing through the Community Engagement G1 Test Preparation Course. This youth was also referred to the CCVT Youth Mentorship Program where they have been practicing their English skills with their mentor. The youth was scheduled for a remote hearing where they received a positive decision! Overall, due to the support of the community engagement program and youth programs, this youth was able to improve their life skills and combat their isolation.

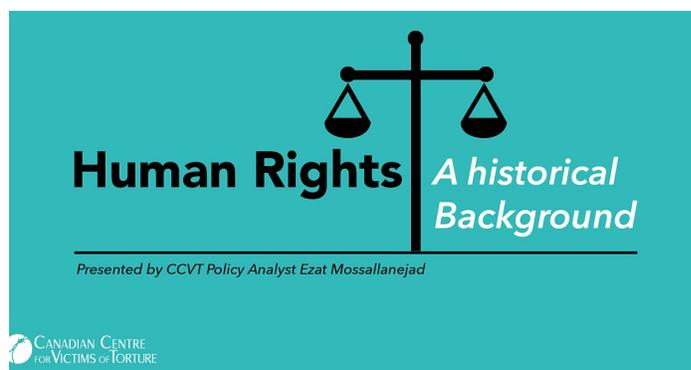
PRESENTATIONS AT CCVT:



Ezat Mossallanejad has been working with refugees and traumatized people since the 1980. He joined CCVT as a Director on the Board in 1992, and a staff Counsellor in 1997. Presently, he works at CCVT simultaneously as a Settlement Counsellor and Policy Analyst. Apart from providing clients with face to face trauma counselling, he acts as the editor of the First Light, the bi-annual journal of the CCVT. Prior to working with the CCVT, he worked as a Youth Counsellor with St. Christopher House and as the Coordinator of the Jesuit Refugee Service–Canada. He has also served as the editor and a member of the Editorial Board of Refugee Update and the Chair of the Board of Culturelink and a Board member of the Inter-Church Committee for Refugees. He is one of the founding members of the Canadian Centre for International Justice (CCIJ). He has given lectures on torture and trauma in various colleges and universities in and outside Canada. As well as served as a part-time professor of immigration, trauma, diversity and social policy at Seneca College. He is also the author of books such as *Torture in the Age of Fear* (2005), *Religions and the Cruel Return of Gods* (2012) and *Crimes and Punishment in Islam*.

Human Rights - A Historical Background November 5, 2020: Ezat Mossallanejad

Discussions about the fundamental rights of human beings, regardless of their differences, goes back to almost 6000 years ago with reference to the Golden Rule in our ancient civilizations: treat people the way you want them to treat you. We can find traces of human rights in almost all religions of the world, either ancient or modern. This session will discuss the traces of human rights from the 14th century BCE to 25th century BCE. Rights of human beings is not exclusive to any particular faith or philosophy. It is an indivisible and universal concept that belongs to all human beings across the globe.



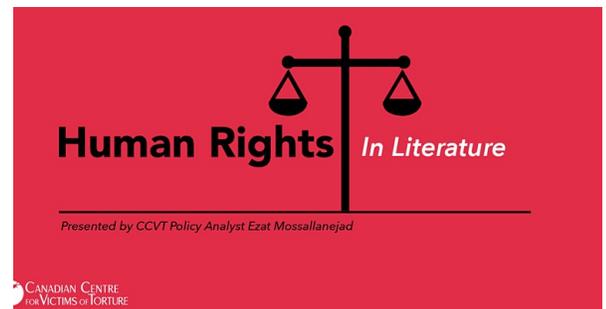
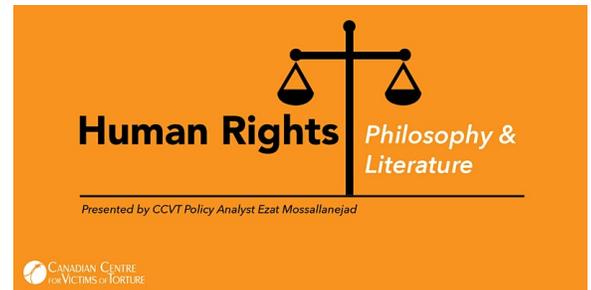
History of Human Rights Developments: PHILOSOPHY & LITERATURE

December 10, 2020

Traces of rights of human beings can be found in the history of philosophy and literature from the ancient times up to present era. Segments of philosophical works have been found in Babylonia and Egypt dealing with passion for life and respect for dignity of humankind. The great Greek philosopher, Socrates, died by drinking hemlock and refused to escape the jail, as a sign of respect for the rule of law. His disciple, Plato, suggested a utopian city ruled by philosophers. With his encyclopedic mind, Aristotle, has come up with theses on rights of citizens and about the best governance. The most ancient principles of medical ethics belong to Hippocrates in 5th century BCE. With his emphasis on hedonism and human pleasure, Epicurus of Ephesus can be considered as a pioneer of right to life and security. He was followed by the Roman philosopher and poet Lucretius. Cynics and Stoics have also made their own contributions. We can conclude from the above that the concept of human rights and dignity is a common theme in philosophy and literature without being limited to one particular geographical region.

Literature is an aesthetic reflection of human life through the use of words, as is referred to in French as *belles lettres* (beautiful words). In its actual functioning, literature goes beyond the sheer reflection of the life. It mixes the reality with emotion, imagination and fantasy. While the persons of letters are influenced by their social environment, they also convey their own messages through literary work. Throughout ages literature has contributed to the fundamental rights of humankind including the right to life, happiness, justice, freedom, equality and equity. Ordinary people have also reflected their fundamental rights through folkloric literature.

**Notifications for upcoming presentations will be sent to you via email.
Please register if interested.**



HUMAN RIGHTS IN LITERATURE
January 14, 2021



If you are interested in submitting
an article to the Connections

Please send it to:

Huda Bukhari: hbukhari@ccvt.org

Ismail Elnour: ielnour@ccvt.org

Ari Barbalat: ari.barbalat@gmail.com
