



# *25<sup>th</sup>* *Anniversary* Newsletter

*A look back on twenty-five years of  
serving newcomers in Ottawa.*

25 years is a significant milestone in any organization's history. We are extremely grateful for all the support OMRA has received from so many sources over the years. It has allowed our many members and volunteers to make an impact in helping newcomers in Ottawa get a solid start to rebuilding their lives. We are also grateful to have become friends with so many of our clients. We hope you enjoy these stories, new and old, presented in this special anniversary edition of OMRA's newsletter.

# OMRA 2001-2026

## *Celebrating 25 Years of Helping with Housing*

*Carol Buckley has been with OMRA since 2017 and she undertakes a variety of roles in client support, fund-raising, communications and acts as OMRA's Vice President.*

*By Carol Buckley*

OMRA has been helping newcomers adapt and thrive in Ottawa since 2001. Over 140 families and individuals have benefited from an OMRA rent subsidy that fills the gap between government shelter allowances and market rents. The average 2025 rent for a two-bedroom apartment in Ottawa was \$2,200 but the shelter allowance for a family of three was only

\$697<sup>1</sup>. With OMRA's rent support, newcomers can focus on getting the language, education and work skills they need to be independent.

### **OMRA's Beginnings**

In 2001, when OMRA first started assisting newcomers, the emphasis was on helping large families secure a home in a time of very low rental vacancies. The Ottawa Mennonite Church bought a townhome with assistance from Emmanuel United Church and the federal government to house a family of six that the Church was sponsoring. OMRA Shelter Corporation provided reduced rent and a sister corporation, OMRA Shelter Alternatives, bought three more townhouses which housed thirteen families over time.

### **Raising Money Through Grocery Cards**

Because the revenue from the townhouse rents did not meet ongoing costs, OMRA began the grocery

card program to generate sustainable funding. OMRA purchases



*Tutoring: OMRA volunteers provide a friendly face and language support*



*AGM: OMRA members get an annual update*



*Picnic: OMRA's annual picnic brings together families and supporters for a day of summer fun and good food*

grocery cards from local stores and sells them to participants. The stores pay OMRA 4%-5% of the value of the cards. Glebe-St. James United Church, St. Thomas the Apostle Anglican Church, The Society of Friends (Quakers), St. Joseph's Catholic Church, Temple Israel and several groups of friends and colleagues joined the Ottawa Mennonite Church and Emmanuel United Church in supporting OMRA's grocery card program. Today, over 250 people and ten groups buy OMRA grocery cards every month.

### **Helping More Families**

In 2017, OMRA started focusing on small families and individuals because they get little or no help from Canada's child tax benefits available to larger families. OMRA Shelter Alternatives sold two of its townhouses to free up capital and to reduce landlord-related pressures. Finally, OMRA began offering portable rent subsidies, so that OMRA could help newcomers who didn't live in OMRA townhouses. These changes permitted OMRA to expand its support from four families at one time to 25-30 families at once. OMRA also achieved charitable status in 2022, making fundraising more flexible.

### **Providing More Services to Increase Independence and Success**

In 2025, OMRA recognized that, post-pandemic, the increased volume of refugees and asylum seekers has seriously stretched available settlement services for newcomers. This is resulting in long wait times for administrative help, language

tests and health and employment supports. In April, 2025, OMRA hired a Client Service Manager to identify client needs and link them to local resources. The CSM also oversees over 50 volunteers who tutor and mentor OMRA

clients. These functions respond to the finding from OMRA's 2024 University of Ottawa evaluation that OMRA's individualized supports and linkages to the community were extremely valuable for OMRA clients and part of OMRA's success. In under one year, the CSM has helped many clients get full or part time employment, linked clients to doctors and dentists, provided donated laptops, and facilitated dozens of volunteer hours of support.

### **Building Strong Community Partnerships**

To augment the grocery card program, OMRA has been working hard at



*Moving: OMRA provides kitchen goods and linens and facilitates moving day with partners like Helping with Furniture*



*Tamarack Race Day: Celebrating OMRA and raising funds at Ottawa's Tamarack Race*

diversifying its sources of income.

OMRA is grateful for grants from the Ottawa Community Foundation, the Catherine Donnelly Fund as well as the Grey Sisters, the Ontario English Catholic Teachers Association, the Basilian Fathers, the Walls and Ceilings Contractors Association, Alterna Bank, Kindred Credit Union and many, many individual donors. OMRA also raises money through the Tamarack Race Day, and in collaboration with the Ottawa Mennonite Church and Ten Thousand Villages events.

### **What's Next for OMRA**

OMRA will continue to help Ottawa's newcomers adapt to their new homes. We look forward to working with our long-standing partners and with new allies to find ways to raise money and connect newcomers with others in the community.

<sup>1</sup>Apartment.com, February 2026, Ottawa and Ontario Resettlement Assistance Program Rates, Jan. 26, 2026

# Maria Rigby

## OMRA's Heart and Soul!

*Maria Rigby, longtime OMRA leader, is stepping back to a reduced role with OMRA, and will become co-president with Carol Buckley. The Board, members, clients and volunteers all thank her for the dedication, heart, vision, and hard work that have helped OMRA grow in breadth and depth over the past 25 years. Donna Rietschlin, a long-time member of OMRA, including many years as a board member, shares some memories of Maria.*

By Donna Rietschlin

Most of you have met, received an email or a phone call from Maria, the outgoing OMRA board president. You know she is generous, chatty and interested in who you are and what you are doing.

Maria has been a close friend for over 50 years, and my husband John and I – also members of OMRA – have the privilege of sharing a bit of her story.

Maria has always had extraordinary amounts of warmth, energy and kindness. She has always had a big heart for those who are vulnerable. And, she has always asked, “How can I make a difference?” and “who can I get to join me?”

Shortly after graduating from St Michael's College at the University of Toronto, Maria volunteered as co-leader with a youth group at St Vincent de Paul Church in Toronto. The members of this group were high school students and university

students. Some were nearly her age. She organized game nights, visits to a long-term care hospital where the young people played board games with the residents, and coffee hour socials after Sunday Masses hosted by the youth. She also planned a retreat for 40 of them on an island in Lake Simcoe in 1972. She did all this while working full time!

Often after youth group gatherings, Maria and the other leaders headed to the Sir Nick on Roncesvalles Ave for a pint and some fries. Invariably one of the members of the group had a birthday and the owners of the Sir Nick would bring out a delicious piece of black forest cake and several forks. It seemed like Maria's birthday was celebrated weekly in 1972!

Maria advocated for justice from the time we met her. She and I spent many a Saturday morning at the entrance to a local supermarket advising people not to buy lettuce or



grapes as the farm workers caring for these crops and harvesting them were treated so badly. (Maria may have been known to remove an item or two from someone's shopping cart as they exited the store while explaining to them why they should not buy these products!)

Maria, you called the group together that became OMRA. We are so thankful to you and for you. We couldn't have done it without you! And

Much love, Donna and John.

# More Than a Place of Refuge

*Joan Fairweather, volunteer, first became involved with OMRA during the pandemic when visiting OMRA families was impossible. Joan rallied her friends to make Christmas gift hampers that were then delivered to families' doorsteps. She later began mentoring several OMRA clients, teaching English via zoom and forming friendships with them. Today these clients have jobs and no longer receive rent subsidies, but some friendships endure.*

By Joan Fairweather

Emily and her son Christopher had only been in Canada a few months when Maria introduced us. As an OMRA volunteer, I would be meeting with Emily every week to provide friendly support with her ESL classes. It was March 2021 and the whole world was in lock-down because of Covid-19, so we met on Zoom. It wasn't until the OMRA

picnic the following summer that I finally met Emily in person – a tiny woman with a beautiful smile – and her shy young son. Over the next four years, as Emily's comfort level in English grew, Canada became more than a place of safety and refuge. On August 22, 2025 Emily and Christopher became Canadian citizens!

Emily started life in the Chin State of Myanmar and spent several years as a refugee in Malaysia before coming to Canada. With OMRA's help, she and her ten-year-old son moved into a small apartment near Walkley Road. Christopher attended school nearby and quickly learned English, as so many newcomer children do. Emily took ESL classes at an adult high school, and made excellent progress. Devout Roman Catholics, Emily and Christopher joined a parish where their Chin language was spoken and became valued members of their church community. On Saturdays, Christopher took Chin language classes there.

Although Emily left her resume with dozens of potential employers, jobs were extremely hard to find in post-Covid Ottawa. Then, Emily heard through her network of Chin friends that Ottawa Municipality was hiring workers in its re-cycling plant. She applied for the job straight away and is still working at the plant two years later. Sorting re-cyclables for 8 hours a day is exhausting work, Emily



told me – especially when you are barely 4ft tall! But her co-workers (all men) made sure she had a stool to stand on and treat her with kindness and respect. I like to think this is the effect sweet Emily is having on them!

Once Emily started working, our weekly conversations tapered off and then stopped altogether. She has very little time or energy left to spend with Christopher now, let alone English classes. But we still call each other from time to time to catch up. Emily loves to cook and whips up amazing meals with just a few simple ingredients. So, before hanging up, I have to ask: “So what are you making for dinner tonight, Emily?” And then she does the same.



**2001**

**Incorporation of OMRA Shelter Corp – providing affordable housing to newcomer family sponsored by the Ottawa Mennonite Church and housed in a townhome owned by sister organization, OMRA Shelter Alternatives.**

**2002**

OMRA Shelter Alternatives purchases 2 more townhomes – now provides affordable housing to 3 families.



**2012**

OMRA Shelter Alternatives buys a 4th townhome – provides assistance to 4 newcomer families.

**2007**

Mortgage on 1st property paid off.

**2016**

OMRA has supported affordable housing for 12 families in its 4 townhomes since 2001.



**2017**

OMRA pilots portable rent subsidies, not tied to an OMRA townhome. OMRA Shelter Alternatives sells 2 townhouses to free up funds. Permits affordable housing assistance to more families at once.



**2019**

1st OMRA picnic – 100 guests enjoyed food, conversation and canoe rides in beautiful Brantwood Park.

**2021**

OMRA works with local allies such as Helping with Furniture to ensure newcomers' homes are furnished.

**2024**

University of Ottawa evaluation says OMRA is effectively reducing risk of homelessness but highlights the need for more services for newcomers.

**2023**

1st Tamarak Race – 40 OMRA supporters raise money and have fun for OMRA's clients.



**2022**

1st general invitation AGM to broaden OMRA membership beyond it's Board and volunteers.



**2025**

OMRA starts drop-in tutoring at local libraries.

**2025**

OMRA Shelter Alternatives sells 3rd townhome to former OMRA clients.



**2022**

OMRA gains charitable status



**2026**

**OMRA celebrates 25 years of addressing high housing costs for newcomers in Ottawa – over 140 families and individuals supported.**



## Starting Over From Zero

*Linda Redekop was an early OMRA board member, eventually becoming secretary for some 12 years. She assisted many families over the years, providing practical assistance and enjoying friendships with them.*

*By Linda Redekop*

Aziz and Mustafa, two brothers from Sudan, were clients of OMRA for three years. They had left home when they were very young, along with two older brothers. The future in Sudan appeared grim for them all, due to military troubles, so reluctantly their parents gave the lads permission to leave. They all went

north to Libya where the two older brothers disappeared, it is thought drowned in the Mediterranean on their way to Europe.

Aziz approached the United Nations office in Libya to ask for help. He'd been separated even from Mustafa, his younger brother. The UN sent him to Rwanda; eventually Mustafa was able to join him. It was determined the lads would go to Canada. 'Where would you like to go in Canada?' they were asked. 'Wherever you send us,' they said, not knowing anything about the country. They would be sent to Ottawa. They were now 19 and 14 years old.

When Aziz and Mustafa finally did arrive in Ottawa in August of 2002, Canadian Immigration officials put them in a hotel and provided help in getting adjusted. They were surprised to see coloured leaves on the trees that Fall. But they were in a holding pattern, and knew no English: what would their future be in this new land? Five long months later CCI (Catholic Centre for Immigration) workers rented an apartment for them, together with a fellow countryman from Sudan, someone whom they'd never met before, but who could help pay rent. The arrangement worked well and is still in place today.

But rent in a two-bedroom apartment was still too high, and OMRA came to their rescue in two ways: providing a rent subsidy and a volunteer to help them learn English. They still meet weekly with OMRA's Sherpa Stephen, though the rent subsidy has stopped. Stephen does much more than teach English: he follows their educational progress, advises on daily problems that arise, and more recently, has helped Aziz and Mustafa navigate bringing their parents and two sisters from war-torn Sudan. If everything goes as planned, they will arrive soon. "Stephen's a good guy" they both said.

The future appears open: both Aziz and Mustafa expect to finish high school this year. Aziz works half time. Mustafa has been accepted into a program at Algonquin College. Their hope is to find a three-bedroom home so the family can all live together again. "We started from zero when we arrived in Canada, but you can build here," they said.

## OMRA History From My View

*Don Thiessen was a member of the OMRA Board since its inception in 2001, and was chair from 2006 to 2017. Don had many contacts in the building trades, and was invaluable in the maintenance and renovation of OMRA's townhouses. Ed Schmidt had been chair from 2001-2006, and was successful in obtaining a SCPI Grant of \$150,000, allowing OMRA to put a down payment on three townhouses. By Don Thiessen*

One Sunday after the church service I was approached by Maria Rigby and Ed Schmidt to see if I would be open to join a committee to set up a housing program for the refugees OMC was sponsoring. OMRA would find a property and my job would be to inspect the condition of the house to rent for the new refugee family. At the time rental properties were scarce at best. When a suitable property was found, I would inspect it to see what would be required to make it livable for our clients, e.g. new paint, flooring in areas that were worn, and broken light fixtures etc. Also, what kitchen appliances would be required or repaired and did the washer and dryer in the basement work. I would make a list and give an approximate cost for the renovations to the OMRA board for approval. When repairs were completed, the house was turned over to the refugee committee for client move in.

One of the challenges I faced was that the clients



*Don and Ed, with Maria Rigby, Erin Thiessen, Bernie Dueck, and Linda Redekop. The occasion is the burning of the mortgage of the Pimlico townhouse (pictured below) in 2007, only six years after purchase.*

had never lived in a home that they would have to look after. When the people moved in, I would spend an hour or two going through the home, showing them how to work the appliances, e.g. washer and

dryer, thermostat, etc. The garbage disposal, shoveling their front step and sidewalk in the winter was also included in the tour. I remember one family from Africa's first gas bill was phenomenal. When I went

over to check the furnace the house was close to 30 degrees inside and the kids were running around in shorts and T-shirts. It was 20 below outside. I instructed them to set the thermostat much lower and dress the kids warmer. All in all, I enjoyed working with these people. Some came with horror stories they had escaped from and were truly happy to have a home of their own.



*The OMRA Board Members invite you and your family to our*

## Annual OMRA Potluck Picnic!

**Brantwood Park, 39 Onslow Cres  
August 15, 12:00 to 3:30**

*Come and join us for an afternoon of friendship, delicious food, great conversation, fun and games and a paddle on the Rideau River.*

### **What to bring:**

*Yourselves and your family, food to share, drinks for your family, a blanket or a lawn chair. OMRA will provide plates, cutlery, napkins etc.*

*No rain date – let's hope for blue skies!*

### **How to get there:**

*Bus routes 5 and 55 go down Main Street – exit at stop 7641 or 7642 (Main and Bower/Beckwith) and walk east, through the stone gates, and downhill on Beckwith Street, 2 short blocks to the park.*

### **RSVP:**

*Rigby.OMRA@gmail.com*



# The Long Path to Success

*Neha is a volunteer with OMRA, helping with communications and fundraising. Here she interviews Amena, who last year became OMRA's full time Client Services Manager. Amena's story is a wonderful illustration of how a newcomer's path to success is helped with support from the community.*

By Neha Naeem

Amena Khavari, OMRA's Client Services Manager, has a story that is anything but ordinary. Like most refugees, her journey is filled with detours and triumphs. I had the privilege of speaking with Amena in May to better understand her, her vision for the future, and her reflections on the past.

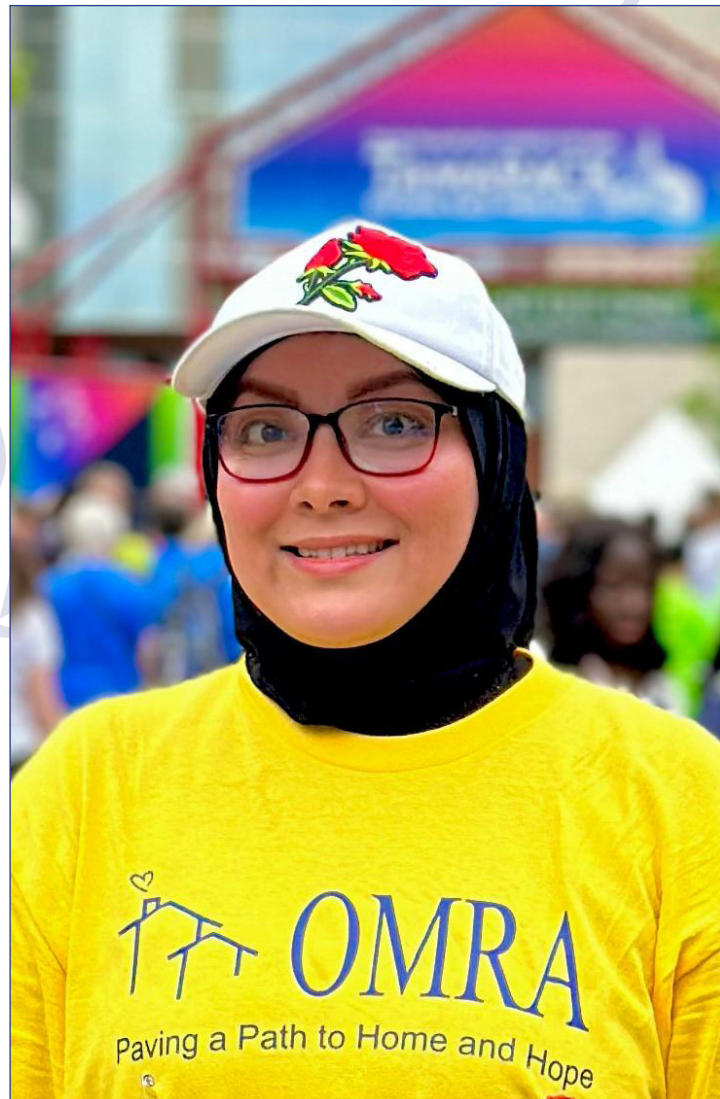
Amena came to Canada in 2021 as a refugee. Prior to this, she was a student in the United States on a Fulbright Scholarship. As part of the conditions of her scholarship, she was required to return to Afghanistan, her home country.

"When I was planning to return, I received a call from my mother stating that I couldn't come back, and that the government had fallen and had been taken over by the Taliban."

Amena then decided to come to Canada as a refugee, as her situation had rapidly changed.

Arriving in Canada was anything but easy. With few resources,

she found herself in an emergency shelter, cramped with many other people in a gymnasium with beds tightly placed together. Amena knew she needed to look for other housing options, especially when her backpack – with all her documents – was almost stolen in the middle of the night.



That's when her case worker told her she should contact OMRA. Despite not being technically eligible at the time, since she was neither a permanent resident nor a protected

refugee, but rather a refugee claimant, Amena went forward and contacted the OMRA Board. Luckily, the Board agreed to help.

Not only did OMRA provide a rent subsidy, but they also provided a vital support system and network. OMRA is well connected in the Ottawa community, especially within the refugee and housing space.

Amena, keen on finding a job, applied for a Volunteer Coordinator and Afghan Refugees Support position at the Catholic Centre for Immigrants (CCI). Despite having the required qualifications, including relevant education, language skills, and professional experience from her home country, Amena faced significant challenges finding employment as a newcomer to Canada without prior Canadian work experience. Through the support, mentorship, and connections she developed at OMRA, Amena ultimately secured meaningful employment and successfully began her professional career in Canada.

Hearing Amena's story, I was humbled. As someone who was raised and educated in Canada, I often take my family, friends, and network for granted. Most refugees do not have this support, which can make it even harder to find work, resources, and help.

It made me reflect on OMRA's wide reach. Not only does OMRA

provide subsidies, it also provides people with a network and community that helps set them up for their next steps.

Unfortunately, about three years after securing her first job in Canada, Amena was laid off. Like many refugees, she faced delays in renewing her work permit through no fault of her own. At the same time, her employer was experiencing the impact of federal budget cuts and workforce reductions. As a result of these circumstances, her employment was terminated despite her strong performance and commitment to her role.

Amena discussed how difficult this was, as work permit renewals are only dealt with by IRCC.

"I emailed MPs, lawyers, and no one could help me. It was especially hard because I paid my rent and supported my family back home."

Like many refugees, Amena was overwhelmed.

That's when she reached out to OMRA for work. She was already a volunteer and had been a Board member for almost two years. Luckily, OMRA was excited to hire Amena as a Client Services Manager, which opened a new chapter for both Amena and OMRA, as she became OMRA's first official contractor.

"My own experience of living as a refugee has really helped me understand and navigate many of the same systems that OMRA clients face. This includes navigating complex government websites, finding local and community resources, connecting with lawyers, and understanding how immigration processes work. Having gone through these challenges myself has allowed me to better

support others as they navigate their own settlement journey in Canada."

Amena also emphasized that each refugee is different and has different needs and supports. Refugees are not a monolith, and she wished the general public understood that.

When asked what one thing she wished Canadians knew about refugees, I was taken aback by her candor.

"I wish people understood that every refugee's journey is different. Our paths are not linear, and each of us carries different experiences, traumas, challenges, and hopes. Some of us had access to education and professional careers be-

***"When I was planning to return, I received a call from my mother stating that I couldn't come back, and that the government had fallen and had been taken over by the Taliban."***

fore being displaced, while others lost those opportunities because of war, persecution, or poverty. Sometimes people make assumptions about refugees based on how we dress, how we speak, or where we come from. What they may not see are the obstacles we have overcome, the resilience we have developed, and the determination we have to rebuild our lives and contribute to our new communities when given the opportunity,"

she said in a sombre tone.

She described how one of the main questions she is asked is where she is from, despite her years of effort to become a Canadian citizen. She also mentioned that many people feel foreigners should lose their ethnic identity the longer they live in Canada.

This surprised me. Even in today's political climate, I did not expect people to be so brazen. It made me reflect on how OMRA is such a beacon of hope and humanity, regardless of social and political trends.

Amena's story is one of coming full circle: being a refugee claimant, discovering OMRA, receiving subsidies and employment resources, finding work, and ultimately working for OMRA herself.

I was keen to know what she found most gratifying about her job.

"It's seeing people enter a new life stage, whether it be a successful OSAP application, going back to school, or finding work."

OMRA recipients know that the goal of the program is to support their journey to independence by giving them

a helping hand. However, when they find full-time or part-time work, the subsidy may decrease or end. While that can be bittersweet and nerve-racking, it also means the subsidy can go to other people walking in their shoes.

Amena explained: "I'm happy that OMRA clients are sharing this with me. I am happy to be someone they can rely on during their highs and lows and come to me. It's an honour."

## 25 Years with OMRA: A Journey of Welcome, Partnership, and Hope

by Maria Rigby

Twenty-five years on the OMRA Board of Directors – what an extraordinary privilege it has been to be part of OMRA from its beginning in 2001 through 2026.

For me, OMRA has always been about people, the incredible newcomers and volunteers. It has been an honour to meet people from around the world, learn about their cultures, enjoy their hospitality, and share in their traditions.

I think of the Somali mother who changed her birthday to July 1 – Canada Day – to celebrate the new life she and her five children had found here.

I remember the young Congolese mother who arrived in Ottawa, gave birth within her first week, and was housed in a University of Ottawa dorm room. Five years later, with determination, new housing and OMRA's support, she became a nurse.

I admire the grandmothers who quietly hold families together through endless cooking, cleaning, and childcare while their children get paying jobs.

I remember foreign-trained doctors, lawyers, and other professionals who accepted entry-level

jobs as PSWs etc. while working to rebuild their careers and support their families.

There were many joyful moments too. One young Sudanese

age and dedication. OMRA has also brought me lasting friendships with volunteers who share a commitment to welcoming newcomers with dignity and respect.

When OMRA began, we never imagined it would take so many new directions. That growth reflects the creativity, dedication, and openness of each successive team of Board members. Over the years, OMRA has evolved in remarkable ways – from owning four townhouses rented to large families in need, to supporting 30-35 families each year in private rental accommodations through monthly rent subsidies, to hiring a Client Services Manager to expand settlement services in education, health, employment, and financial literacy.

As I prepare to serve as co-chair for the coming year, I do so with gratitude and confidence. I am de-

lighted to have been part of a Board that is full of ideas, energy, and future initiatives. I am deeply grateful to have shared with so many newcomers, their remarkable journeys and look forward with hope to all that lies ahead for OMRA.

Thank you, OMRA, for the friendships, and joy you have brought to my life.



teenager arrived at the Ottawa airport and was bundled in three coats, boots, scarves, and mittens and was still shivering! Within weeks, he was happily throwing snowballs dressed like any Canadian teenager – in a sweater and running shoes.

From all of these and many others, I learned much about cour-