**Habitat Selects Family for Crescent Street**

Habitat For Humanity Rutland is running out of time to start construction on their fourth full house — they still need $35,000 to begin building and need four walls and insulation up before the snow starts to fall.

This house is estimated to cost $125,000, and we’ve raised $90,000 thus far,” said Jean Yeager, a resource volunteer at H4H. “Habitat takes all of this gift money, amasses it, and then turns it into loan money and loans it to the people selected to live in that house (who have a) mortgage of zero interest.”

H4H Board President Eric Solsaa said before building a home, H4H solicits applications, reaching out to the public who might qualify for what Solsaa called a “tight economic window.”

“They have to be low income, but they can’t have a high debt-to-income ratio,” Solsaa said. “And just like any other bank, we do a credit history. ... We look at if they’ve had any trouble with the law.”

The soon-to-be homeowners also have to have a stable income, have good credit, and be living in a situation where high rent or unsuitable living conditions make raising a family difficult, and Yeager said this year more than 20 people applied.

That makes the family of Hassam Alhallak and Hazar Mansour and their three children perfect candidates for Rutland’s new home at 120 Crescent St., a quick walk from where they currently live in a small apartment with only one closet.

When the war hit Syria, Alhallak and Mansour were living in the center of Damascus, drove two cars and had a separate summer home.

“We kept waiting,” Hazar said of the war waging on. “But things never changed.”

Finally, Alhallak said there was a risk that he could be drafted into Bashir al-Assad’s army, and Alhallak and Mansour knew that meant he would be forced to commit horrible acts of violence for the regime.

While many of their friends escaped abroad to Europe, Mansour said they traveled to Turkey instead, where they lived for two years, but Turkey wasn’t necessarily kind to Syrians.

When Alhallak finally found employment, the couple found Turkey would only pay Syrians half of what the Turkish made, simply for being Syrian.

“It was our dream,” Alhallak said. “To come to America.”

So after applying to the United Nations and two years of interviews, the family was finally cleared to travel from Turkey to Los Angeles, and they quickly reached out to Arabic contacts in the city and packed their bags full with warm-weather clothing.

“We were so happy,” Alhallak said.

But at the last minute, the family was told they were coming, instead, to Rutland, and Mansour unpacked all of the family’s clothing and replaced it with cold-weather clothes.

When they arrived at JFK airport, they loaded into a car and were driven up to Rutland where a group of people, including members of the Islamic Society in Colchester, greeted them.

For 10 days, the family stayed at the house of RHS vice-principal Greg Schillinger, and Alhallak said his first job was working for Donald Billings at The Bakery.

“I liked it,” Alhallak said. “Donald helped me a lot ... but I told them, I’ll work here until I get my accounting certification.”

Up at 4 a.m., to work, and then he and his wife went to Community College of Vermont classes for four hours until 9 p.m. twice a week to get their certifications in accounting, and now Alkallak works as an accountant for Casella after attending a job fair in Rutland.

“The first day (of our classes), we understood nothing,” Alhallak said.

But every weekend, Mansour, when not tending to her children or shopping with her husband, would look up Arabic to English translations in their accounting text books on YouTube, and along with English classes, slowly taught themselves how to understand the new world around them.

For Mansour, this is the fourth language in her repertoire alongside French, Turkish and Arabic. She once taught French as a teacher.

The couple said they plan to continue to attend more accounting and English classes at CCV, and their children are enrolled in various recreational activities in school and through the Rutland Recreation Department.

Rutland, unlike Damascus, is quiet and has lots of trees, and the couple said they greatly enjoy the school system, the closeness to so many universities and colleges, and the interaction with so many well-educated people.

A look inside their apartment on Crescent Street reveals a tiny, well-kept kitchen, and small living room in pale shades of creams and golds, with white poinsettias, gauzy curtains and a fluffy white rug.

Anyone fortunate enough to be invited to the home is greeted by Hussam’s bright smile and bright laugh, and may even be served rich, cardamom-infused coffee or Syrian pastries on a golden tray.

But their kitchen is so small they cannot eat together, and five people live in an apartment built for two at the most. The couple had their youngest, Danyal, just 14 months ago.

“When we found out (about the Habitat for Humanity house),” Alhallak said. “It was like flying!”

The money donated to H4H is used to buy materials for their house from entirely local suppliers, Yeager said, including Rotella, LaValley, Home Depot, Rob Stubbins Electrical, to create a home suitable for Efficiency Vermont certifications, but Solsaa said volunteers only work two days a week, so getting the home up in time is a challenge.

The family will be required to put in at least 400 hours of volunteer work to build their new home, along with the volunteers whom Solsaa said numbered more than 150 during last year’s build.

Someone affiliated with H4H then assists the new family with managing their finances, and they’re required to go through a “first home-buyer class,” at Neighborworks of Southwestern Vermont to teach them how to handle mortgage payments on time.

It will take eight months to build it from the basement up Yeager said, so time is of the essence, and Habitat is hoping to expand its donor base as quickly as it can.

katelyn.barcellos@rutlandherald.com.