

The Story Behind the Mural

For six weeks, starting May 5, 2014, Welcome Home residents, volunteers and staff joined local artist Pamela Rojas to transform the side wall of Welcome Home into a vibrant outdoor mural that tells the story of the refugee experience in Kitchener-Waterloo.

Rojas, who has lived in many countries, arrived in K-W nine years ago and worked as a social worker for several years, helping new immigrants through the settlement process. She says it was always challenging for new arrivals to find a decent, safe, clean place to live, and she was always thrilled when her clients were able to move into Welcome Home.

While much of the mural shows the many activities connected with Welcome Home—camping, canoeing, practicing English, cooking, celebrating holidays together—Rojas also introduced a more symbolic element to the mural: a series of jars that illustrate the mural's theme, Stories Of New Beginnings.



“The jars are a visual representation of what people bring with them when they come here, what they keep inside,” says Rojas.



The most prominent jar on the far right shows little planes flying around the globe, and then buildings in the foreground with the CN Tower in the background. This jar shows the arrival of refugees by plane, often first to Toronto and then to Kitchener.

At the centre of the mural is a jar that reminds viewers that refugees are here because they have come from traumatic, challenging and dangerous situations, often through a lengthy period in the refugee camp system. Refugees carry these stories inside them too.



Two small jars are found toward the bottom of the mural: one represents communication with family and friends from home, while the other stands as a reminder of those who were loved and lost or left behind. These people are also carried closely into a refugee's new life.



On the edge of the mural is a flower pot with the names of sponsors on the flowers growing in the pot. Just as a flower grows with light, water and good soil, so refugees and the Welcome Home ministry and even the mural itself are dependent on the generous resources of people and organizations that want to see all people, including refugees, blossom and flourish.

But even the art-making process has symbolic meaning. Rojas says that art can be used to build community and to advocate for newcomers in beautiful ways. She notes that especially in an often-dark and gray city, people respond to the joyous colours of the mural. She also very deliberately works with teams of volunteer painters who follow her “map” of the mural to actually do a kind of paint-by-numbers collaborative painting process. Often, she says, volunteers are scared at first but the process shows them that together—like Welcome Home itself—they can make something beautiful.



There is much more to discover in this mural—shoes like the many that can always be found in Welcome Home’s front stairwell, faces that show Welcome Home’s diversity. Both Welcome Home and Rojas hope that you will take the time to discover the stories for yourself and to find yourself in the stories of the mural and of Welcome Home.

Many thanks to the 145 volunteers who painted, to Pamela Rojas for your vision and to our sponsors for funding this special 10th anniversary project.

