

# The Pioneer

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Photo by Tyson Dusselier

An RCMP officer addresses a refugee, holding nothing but his phone, crossing into Canada through Roxham Road, an illegal port of entry. The RCMP set up temporary tents to handle the influx of asylum seekers fleeing President Donald Trump's threats of deportation.

## Asylum seekers head to Canada

By Tyson Dusselier

The wind whistling through the trees is easily mistaken for the constant hum of tires coming down the stretch of pavement that ends no more than 20 metres from the border.

In the distance, one can faintly hear the echo of a dog's bark, on and off every five or so minutes. The only light comes gleaming down from two solitary lampposts, one on the road and one dangling over the trailer set behind the bushes. The toads crossing the stretch of uneven pavement wet their feet in each puddle along the way, birds whistling a tune to match the hum bellowing from the forest.

A ditch, marked by what looks like a shrunken Washington monument, a telephone pole laden with sensors, and a distorted 'Road Closed' sign is a gaping hole in the world's largest unprotected land border.

Looking like nothing more than a dead

end, a small dirt path imprinted with countless footprints bridges the gap over the ravine separating the two countries.

Fluorescent orange pylons with reflective tape mark the pathway down, gated by two drums, and often lit by the taxi headlights as asylum seekers flood out of the cabs coming from the bus station. A quick exchange determines whether French or English best suits the scenario and families timidly saunter down the path.

Men and women in police uniforms come down to meet them halfway, offering consoling but frank statements outlining the realities of the situation when they cross that line.

Often the asylum seekers duck their heads with intention and drag their suitcases across. Just as often, they spin around with fleeting confidence, looking for approval from family or friends.

Some turn away and make their way to the legal border crossings, while others

choose to be processed right there in the town of temporary tents, set up by the RCMP to process the influx of those fleeing President Donald Trump's threats of deportation.

This parade of asylum seekers is stepping through America's back door and into Canada via a small stretch of road known as Roxham Road, ending just north of Champlain, New York at the doormat of Quebec, near the town of Hemmingford.

While neither country is at war, nor ravaged by natural disasters, most of these now-displaced Americans have originally come from other countries that are or have been affected by disaster and war.

This means that because of Canada's Safe Third Country Agreement with the United States, refugees are required to make their asylum claims in the first country they land in. With the sweeping change in dialogue surrounding immigration in America, many refugees now wish to enter Canada

but are forced to cross illegally to receive asylum.

Many ethnic groups, like Haitians, are among those singled out as President Trump earmarks those at risk of deportation—roughly 85,000 of them were granted temporary protection status (TPS) after the devastating 2010 earthquake.

The Centre for Migration Studies, in the U.S., has identified approximately 320,000 TPS protected residents of the United States, almost the entirety of them up for deportation in the first six months of 2018, at the discretion of the American government.

Those split between Haiti, Honduras, and El Salvador, protected under TPS, hold an employment rate somewhere in the range of 85 per cent, well outperforming the United States as a whole by roughly 20 per cent.

An estimated 35,000 of them are self-employed, and in some cases employing others. More than half of the Honduran and

El Salvadorian population has lived in the country for more than 20 years.

As temperatures drop and the rhetoric continues south of the border at a federal level, as well as chatter passed along through social media, are enough to motivate asylum seekers to continue through to Canada, leaving employment and lives behind. While many are up for deportation on the basis of TPS, asylum seekers from a variety of nations are still seen crossing.

In September, the Canada Border Services Agency processed 205 refugee claimants at Quebec's land borders. While September was the slowest month of the year, it wasn't far off from the three summer months that preceded it, 105 claims being the largest difference.

Only time will tell if the numbers still looking for refugee status will hold steady or keep climbing as the clock winds down for many groups in the United States.

## Transitional home started in honour of woman's late son

By Andrew Ryan

Laura McLean had a nagging feeling as she watched her checked luggage zip away on the conveyor belt at Pearson Airport. It was a stormy day in February of 2014 and her son Jessie helped her get her luggage into the car not three hours before in Brighton.

It wasn't the first time the owner of Island Salsa in Cobourg decided to pick up and go backpacking in Guatemala, but on that February day, she felt something wasn't right, and this time, couldn't walk past the security gate.

"So in the morning I'm at the airport," says McLean and pauses. "I just felt it. The bags were already in the plane and I couldn't go through the gate so I called Maryanne [Burley]," she continued, referring to her daughter-in-law.

McLean immediately told Burley that she couldn't get ahold of Jessie by phone.

In an interview, Burley said she was used to the drill, but felt compelled to check on her 28-year-old-brother-in-law. She had seen and helped Jessie through his overdoses before and went across the street to the McLean farm where she found him lifeless.

At the airport, connected by phone, McLean said all she could hear was Maryanne's screams and pleas for her not to get on the plane.

It took Laura five hours to get to her son that evening from Pearson Airport in the middle of a snowstorm.

Now, over three years later, sipping grapefruit juice in her kitchen, which opens up into the forests of Spring Valley in Brighton, McLean struggles in recounting why she decided to leave her 28-year-old, fighting a losing battle against opiate addiction.

The last two years leading up to his death, McLean said she started smok-



Laura McLean is the owner and operator of Jessie's House in Belleville.

ing cigarettes every time an ambulance passed her house.

"He told me he was going to die, I knew he was going to die. He used to play that song, *Hate Me*," she said.

The song is a gut-wrenching letter from an addict to his mother written by Blue October's Justin Furstenfeld, from 2007.

It's a song in which a son sings to his mother "While I was busy waging wars on myself you were trying to stop the fight" and talks about moving far away so that his mother doesn't have to think about him again.

It's sung from the point of view of a son

who thanks his mom for standing by him and helping him through his fight to get clean. Each refrain returns to his underlying wish that she would hate him so that he could stop causing her so much pain.

"But you can never hate them right?" Laura said recalling the period just before that day in February, 2014.

"So I was really pressured and I thought I'd go to Guatemala for a week's vacation...He was just at an Narcotics Anonymous conference in Toronto. And I kind of had a feeling because he was so quiet and he put my luggage in the car."

Jessie's funeral in Belleville was attended by at least 120 people, according to McLean.

She started Jessie's House in Belleville in his memory. It's a house for those recovering from addiction and mental health, something born of an idea that her son had himself.

"Jessie's House was his idea. He said how it was in the street and nobody could get help. If everybody had a house to live in and to get better, a nice clean house, he thought that would work."

She said mental health puts people into

boarding houses, but doesn't do any constructive repair work for them. It just provides them with a place to stay.

"Instead of cramming all the rooms (at Jessie's House), I've created a beautiful space with a dining room and a living room with WiFi for them, and taking less people and becoming an extended family. Their closer to each other," she said.

In the first year of the house's existence McLean was attacked by a mentally ill boarder. She was struck in the face and bitten, and suffered through an infection for the next six months.

"You have a vision, and when you have a vision of a goal that you really want to go for, you go for it. I still have hope, less now, but I still have hope that people can get better," says McLean about continuing after the assault.

"I still believed I could change things," she says.

The house has been running two years since, with no external assistance, and has helped approximately 50 people with varying life circumstances get back on their feet.

McLean has thrown her life into the home since Jessie's death, says Burley. Her daughter-in-law says McLean has been committing 99 per cent of her life to working at the house over the last three years.

"I knew I had to go into the problem for myself, and for others," McLean says adding that she couldn't get any help for Jessie anywhere even when he wanted to die. "I couldn't get Jessie in anywhere, I couldn't get any help for him anywhere. Even when he wanted to die. Not in hospitals, it was six weeks just waiting for a phone call."

McLean says the need is strong for transition houses in Belleville and has been astounded as to how difficult it's been to get government funding and approval from the city.