



THE IMPORTANCE OF A WARM WELCOME AT *every stage*

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photos: Courtesy of l'Accueil francophone

The Accueil francophone organizes a number of activities to promote the integration of newcomers. For example, in the pictures, from left to right, Camp Rêve (Dream Camp), le Noël des enfants (Children's Christmas) or participation in the Festival du Voyageur.

BY CAMILLE HARPER

Francophone newcomers to Manitoba, whether they are economic immigrants or refugees, are an undeniable asset and support to the Francophone language and culture in Manitoba, the maintenance of French language services, and the Francophone and bilingual economy and businesses.

However, they must feel welcomed and integrated enough to want to stay and become involved in their new community. The role of the Accueil francophone is to do everything possible to offer a warm welcome and facilitate this integration, from the country of origin until long after their first steps on Manitoba soil.

Emigrating is not an easy task. It means leaving one's habits, one's landmarks, a part of one's family, and often also a job. In order to expand Manitoba's Francophone space in the long term, with newcomers who will become involved in community life, the Accueil francophone has developed many services to welcome them and help them settle and integrate.

Bintou Sacko is the Director of the Accueil francophone. "Since February 2019, with our pre-departure service, we offer a service to future Francophone newcomers to Manitoba before they even leave their country. Once they have been pre-screened by Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC), if they go out West, they are connected with us.

"We're there to respond to their 1001 questions about degrees, school or housing, or to send them to the organizations that will be able to answer them. The goal is to have as few unknowns as possible for them upon arrival."

One year after its launch, the pre-departure program is already a success. "The target for the first year was 75 to 125 people using the service. We've had 300."

Once the newcomers or refugees have arrived in Manitoba, the Accueil francophone continues to offer its services. Wilgis Agossa, Administrative Assistant and Communications Officer: "We pick up our clients at the airport and take them to our transitional housing if any is available. They can stay there for two to three weeks.

"Very quickly, we also organize a meeting to evaluate the specific needs of the individual or family and we accompany them in all their administrative procedures, or even medical procedures for many refugees. We create with them a clear and personalized settlement plan."

The Accueil francophone also offers a series of optional workshops on various aspects of Canadian society, such as justice, the education system, history, mental health, buying a house or budgeting. "We really want them to have all the information they need in any area. We also help them with the search for permanent housing," says Agossa.

Furthermore, in 2009, the Accueil francophone became the first Francophone reception centre in Canada to have a

Refugee Resettlement Assistance Program (RAP). Wilgis Agossa explains: "We were seeing a lot of Francophones who came as refugees and had no knowledge that a local Francophonie existed. We wanted to help them discover the community and integrate well into it."

Bintou Sacko adds: "Today, not only are we the only French-speaking refugee reception centre, but since the spring of 2019, we are also signatories to an agreement. We can therefore directly sponsor refugees."

As with economic immigrants, the Accueil francophone offers refugees personalized support according to their needs, including help in putting together family repatriation files. For Wilgis Agossa, "it is very important to provide the best possible assistance to refugees. They have suffered trauma and they do not always understand the culture. It's a big challenge."

Until 2016, the Accueil francophone only took care of refugees from French-speaking countries. But with the Syrian crisis in 2016, many Syrian refugees arrived in Manitoba speaking neither English nor French. Since then, the Accueil francophone has been receiving refugees from all over the world. However, the organization continues to serve only Francophone economic immigrants.

Continued on the next page ➤

Continued from previous page ➤

“Each family or individual has their own integration counsellor, who helps them achieve their medium- and long-term goals.” Follow-ups are planned throughout the first year, but counsellors are available to their clients at any time until they become citizens.

The Accueil francophone also focuses on the creation of community links to help its clients in their integration.

Wilgis Agossa explains: “We encourage our clients to volunteer. We also have a twinning

program to discover the community with someone from here, one to discover the rural area and another for seniors. This sector has grown so much that we need at least 300 volunteers.”

“The goal is for newcomers and refugees to flourish in the community, on both the Francophone and Anglophone sides. We are working with many partners to offer as many connections and opportunities to get involved as possible.”

He emphasizes the importance of the host community in the success of these programs: “Successful integration must be a two-way street. The host community must lend a

hand to help newcomers along the way. It’s extremely important to make them feel comfortable in Manitoba.”

For Wilgis Agossa, one of the greatest assets of the Accueil is “the diversity of our staff. We represent about fifteen nationalities and we speak about forty languages in total. We can therefore reach most of our clients in their culture or language.”

“When you arrive in a new country, without any reference points, being understood in your mother tongue is priceless. It can be the difference between a successful immigration or not.” ▶

Nieson Yamondo

“**A**rriving in Winnipeg on April 5, 2019, from the Central African Republic, I was lucky enough to receive help from the Accueil francophone. They helped me, directed me as soon as I arrived at the airport. I received a lot of help. They helped me to open a bank account, to differentiate the currency and also to understand the Canadian educational degree system, the volunteer system and many other things.

“If you don’t understand this foundation, it’s harder to fit in. But once you have all the right information in your pocket, it’s much easier. I also volunteer at the Accueil when they need an interpreter for people who come from the Central African Republic and don’t speak French.

“It’s an almost family relationship that develops between the employees of the Accueil and those who receive help. It helps to integrate. I integrated very quickly, I feel like a Canadian. In addition to information about everyday life, I have received a lot of information about the programs that can be accessed. In fact, it is thanks to them that I was able to integrate at MITT to take English courses. Afterwards, I would like to continue my studies to become a computer engineer.”

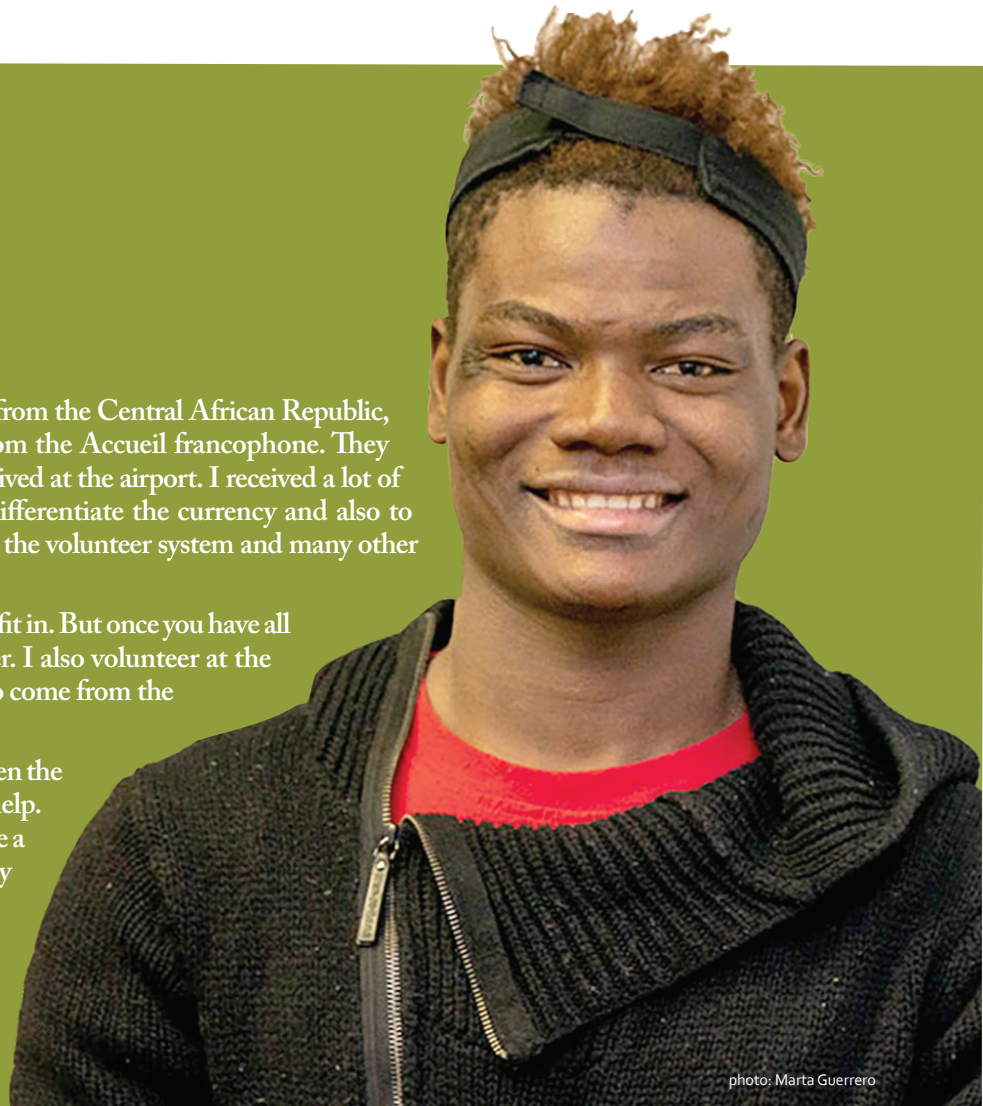


photo: Marta Guerrero