

The Gazette

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Vida Cuadra' son Alphonso 'feels free' in Canada.

New home delights Salvadoran refugee

Alphonso Cuadra's mother has to keep telling him to stop kissing and hugging children on the street.

The five-year-old has been overflowing with affection since he arrived in Canada two weeks ago as part of a special Canadian program for political prisoners from war-torn El Salvador.

"He feels free here," says his journalist mother Vida, explaining how the boy was kept inside his grandparents' home for most of the 2½ years she spent in jail. "It was too dangerous for him to play outside."

Cuadra, 30 and a single mother who headed the independent domestic API news agency, was arrested and charged with "disinformation" when police raided and closed down the agency in February, 1981.

Six other employees were also arrested, but were released five months later.

Cuadra was finally released last May, along with an estimated 800 others, after the Salvadoran regime proclaimed amnesty for political prisoners.

Refugee program

About 140 people, including family members, have already arrived in Canada as a result of the political refugee program announced last June by Immigration Minister Lloyd Axworthy. An estimated 50 more have made applications in El Salvador, said Immigration Department project officer Brian Davis in an interview from Ottawa.

"The minister felt these people were in great danger," noted Axworthy's press aide Pat Preston.

Although she lost much weight in jail because of bland, cockroach-ridden food, Cuadra says

she received better treatment and was not physically tortured because she was a journalist. Appeals from international organizations such as Amnesty International were also made on her behalf.

She chose Canada because it was "the first country to offer financial help and a chance to keep my family, myself and my son together." Belgium also offered her political asylum, while Australia and West Germany have set up similar refugee programs for others.

Helps people readapt

"The program is good because it helps people to readapt, to look toward their future quietly in another country," she says. "There is freedom of expression and freedom of the press here and access to things here."

Those under the program receive full citizenship benefits and a monthly living allowance. Cuadra and her son have also been enrolled in a seven-month language program to learn French and prepare for the job market and school.

Cuadra hopes to be able to work as a journalist, but realizes she may face problems because of language and the tight job market.

The biggest shock for newly-arrived refugees, especially those with professional careers, is the realization that "you probably can't work in your profession, if you can find work; that you have to start from the bottom of the ladder."

Coincidentally, Maria-Alicia Madrid, Cuadra's former executive secretary, has been living in Montreal under another immigrant program for the past year. The two were recently reunited.

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