

BREAKING NEWS

Refugee set for a new life



Lukas Eaton, Nahom Teklemichael, Barb Ryeburn and Kim Eaton are reunited at the Canadian Rockies International Airport on Thursday.

— Image Credit: Trevor Crawley Photo

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- by [Trevor Crawley - Cranbrook Daily Townsman](#)
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Scanning the faces in the crowd of passengers heading into the arrival section of the Canadian Rockies International Airport, a local family began to wonder if their friend had missed his flight.

However, smiles broke out as one of the last travellers, a young man, descended down the stairs to make his way into the building.

His name is Nahom Teklemichael and he is a refugee from Eritrea.

After a long journey from South Sudan in Africa, Teklemichael arrived in Vancouver on Wednesday and into Cranbrook on Thursday where he will begin a new life in Canada.

Just in time for his 22nd birthday on Monday.

Teklemichael was sponsored by East Kootenay Friends of Burma, and while he isn't from the small Southeast Asia country of the same name, he has a personal connection with some local volunteers with the group.

Kim Eaton and Barb Ryeburn were in Eritrea—a small country in the Horn of Africa—volunteering as teachers in the mid-2000s where they met Teklemichael, who became close friends with their oldest son, Lukas. They've remained in contact ever since that trip—including through Teklemichael's experience fleeing Eritrea for South Sudan.

Recently, the EK Friends of Burma was able to secure sponsorship to bring him over to Canada. Now, he will be living with the same family who befriended him in his home country so many years ago.

Now that Teklemichael is here in Cranbrook, the EK Friends of Burma will be there to help him settle into a new life.

"We're excited, but we're scrambling," said Ryeburn. "We need to get supports in place. We need to find him a job, he probably wants to go to school as well. There's a lot of settling in we need to do and we're always looking for people who are interested in getting involved as volunteers to help out.

"Donating clothes, donating funds—because we're responsible for his costs for a year—also just to meet him, befriend him."

While Ryeburn and the EK Friends of Burma have sponsored many individuals and families for relocation in the region, the arrival of Teklemichael is special because of their relationship when Ryeburn was volunteering in Eritrea with her family in 2005.

Eritrea has official languages of Arabic and English, but also use a dialect known as Tigrigna, which is spoken by much of the local population.

While their son, Lukas, was attending school, the family learned that his teacher had instructed the rest of the class to treat him like an outcast.

"Lukas learned from Nahom that the teacher had spoken to all the students in the class and said, 'Shun this boy, don't befriend him, treat him badly, he's a foreigner'," Ryeburn said. "...he was trying to sell this to the students in the class and Nahom spoke up, which was really brave of him and in the end, the teacher failed him.

"Nahom's a smart boy, he didn't deserve to fail, but the teacher did that because he spoke up to defend Lukas."

Ryeburn and the family left Eritrea in 2007 but remained in contact with Teklemichael and his parents, who were well-known and celebrated across the country for their efforts fighting for independence from Ethiopia back in 1993.

However, Ryeburn said the government ended up persecuting the family and took their business which was a catalyst for Teklemichael's eventual desire to flee the country.

In addition to the persecution, all Grade 12 students must complete a year of obligatory military training in a facility near Sawa, which is an environment rampant with all sorts of abuse.

"A lot of people we meet, they flee when they can, especially to avoid Sawa, because it's extremely hard on them," said Ryeburn.

Though the group operates as EK Friends of Burma, don't be confused by thinking that they only help Burmese refugees. The group, which has volunteers across a broad region including Rossland, Fernie and Calgary, has also sponsored refugees from Columbia and Palestine.

For more information on the East Kootenay Friends of Burma, or to wish Teklemichael a happy birthday, give Ryeburn a call at 250-426-6559