

**Mayor Mike Savage column for April edition, Business Voice**

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In late February I made a quiet visit to the hotel at Chocolate Lake at the invitation of Immigrant Settlement Association of Nova Scotia Director Gerry Mills.

Gerry and her team have undertaken the Herculean task of settling hundreds of Syrian refugee families in Halifax. For many the Chocolate Lake hotel became a stopping place on the road to resettlement.

Many Syrian families had already passed through the hotel, off to apartments throughout the city; others continued to wait for apartments to become available. I met young children studying English, smiling as they recited "We like Halifax" in unison only to be corrected by one particularly astute Syrian boy, "No, we *love* Halifax." I met parents eager to find work - *any work* - and begin to piece together lives torn apart by a war not of their making.

The hotel was welcoming, to be sure, with a whole floor dedicated to the families, but it also offered a clear picture of the challenges in settling such large numbers in short order.

While it would be easy to get mired in the issues around settling these Syrian families, we should take our lead from them. In our city they see opportunity, a fresh start for which they are incredibly grateful. We should be similarly grateful for the opportunities they and all newcomers hold for Halifax, for Nova Scotia and the whole of Atlantic Canada. The reality is we need newcomers as much as they need us.

Our city is evolving quickly. Today our skyline is increasingly dotted by towers built by developers whose families came here with little more than a strong work ethic and a desire to make a future for their children. Our universities fill up every fall with more young people from around the globe, many of them eager to make a home in Halifax after graduation. Restaurants proudly serve up international foods, often expertly sharing space on one menu.

This is as it should be if we are to be a progressive, modern welcoming city. We should consider what it truly means to be welcoming. Are we doing enough to open our workplaces to people from a variety of cultures; are we consciously making room for people of different physical and intellectual abilities, and for people who are traditionally underrepresented? Have we fully considered what it means to give younger workers an opportunity to gain experience and share their newly-acquired skills?

Some of the hardest emails and letters I receive as Mayor are from people who are resistant to change, who feel their way of life is under threat from someone who does not share their

background, beliefs or experience. Fortunately, these disheartening views are a minority and we see more people intent upon broadening the circle of belonging.

Are we ready to be a different Halifax tomorrow than we are today? I think so. As we welcome Syrian families and other new Canadians into our neighbourhoods, schools and workplaces, let's do everything we can to become a new home to people who have lost all sense of what the word means.

Let's use the challenges and discussions around their settlement to reflect deeply upon what it means to be an open, inclusive city with opportunities for all to build a brighter future.