

Celebrating life milestones and sisterhood at Carty House

Photo Hilary Duff

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Christiane Koffi remembers the day she became a Sandy Hill resident: "I felt peaceful. I got a nice bed in my own room. I just said 'thank God!'"

Koffi currently resides in Carty House, Ottawa's only home dedicated to refugee women. Located on the southern side of Sandy Hill, Carty House has private rooms for 10 women who, like Koffi, have come to Canada alone and with no other support.

Unlike other housing or emergency shelter options for refugees, Carty House is unique in the level and longevity of support it offers. Rather than capping stays at six months or even a year, the majority of women stay at Carty House for two years.

Feeling settled and safe is central to anyone's wellbeing. But according to Louise Ebeltoft, Manager of Operations and Refugee Services at Carty House, the opportunity to lay down roots in their new home is especially important for refugees.

"So much happens in the first year [in Canada]," states Ebeltoft. "They have their refugee hearing, apply for permanent residence, and get their work permit. Then after the year they can start looking for housing. Having that extra buffer of the second year is when you can start a school program or get a job."

Or, if you're anything like Koffi, you start a school program, get a job, and make it through a global pandemic – all while adjusting to a new home country. Koffi came to Canada from Côte d'Ivoire in late 2018 and moved



Louise Ebeltoft and Christiane Koffi sit on the front porch of Carty House.



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Graduation day from École des adultes Le Carrefour in June 2022.

to Carty House just weeks before the COVID-19 pandemic.

A beautician and hairdresser by trade, Koffi had started working at a salon in the Merivale Mall. Pandemic closures soon ended that chapter, and Koffi decided to go back to school to complete her high school diploma and become a Personal Support Worker (PSW).

Enrolling at École des adultes Le Carrefour, Koffi says her studies were at first a challenge. She hadn't been in school for a long time and many of her classes were online because of the pandemic.

Being at Carty House during this period made a difference. Koffi says she had a private room where she could study, had access to a computer, and if anything came up, she could ask her

"sisters" for help.

"The way we are living here helped me to be a new person and be okay to study again. If you don't have peace, you can't go to school. Waiting for my [refugee] hearing was scary because I didn't know if they would accept me," explains Koffi. "If I didn't have this house, I don't know if I would have been able to do all these things."

In June 2022, Koffi walked across the stage at Le Carrefour and received her high school diploma. Ebeltoft was there cheering her on and adds that she's always honoured to receive an invite to these milestone moments. "I'm proud of them, knowing how much they've accomplished and how hard they've worked, especially as adults coming here and having given up a career," smiles Ebeltoft.

Today, Koffi is a PSW at Élisabeth Bruyère Hospital and is considering returning to school to become a nurse. "But it might be hard for me—I'm not young, you know!" she laughs. In the meantime, Koffi approaches her patients at Bruyère with humility and compassion. "Every day I try to improve myself to show love and empathy," she says. "God prepared me to do this job, because when you suffer in life you can feel the suffering of someone who is sick. This is a mission for me."

For those wishing to support Carty House and the women they serve, they're always looking for donations of cleaning supplies, paper towels, and other everyday items. Clothing donations during seasonal shifts are appreciated and monetary donations are also always welcome. For more information and current needs, including volunteering, visit cartyhouse.org.