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NORTH VANCOUVER'S MEMBER OF PARLIAMENT

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One person's path to opportunity

My staff recently facilitated a virtual Oath of Citizenship ceremony from my office for a new Canadian. As a young Black man living with visual impairment, Bukhari has met many challenges head on, but he has persevered with his new life here, and was very proud to speak the Oath, sing the national anthem and be declared a Canadian in the virtual ceremony. Several of the people from the Regional Ecumenical Sponsorship Team (REST), a small refugee sponsorship non-profit here in North Vancouver, joined my office staff to quietly celebrate this milestone.

Bukhari was born in Somalia the year the war began there. He spent his whole young life with his family living with the uncertainty of no functioning government, no health care, and not a lot of prospects for young people like himself.

Courage and grit

As a teenager, he suffered a head injury that resulted in him gradually losing his sight as a young adult. With great courage and lot of grit, he first went to Uganda to seek medical assistance, and then to Kenya, hitching rides on trucks and cooking for the truckers when they stopped at night.

He spent many years as a refugee in Nairobi, seeking medical advice to hopefully recover his eyesight; finally, he reached the conclusion that he needed specialized care only available in countries like ours. He applied to come to Canada as a refugee and was selected for the Blended Visa Office Referred program in 2015.

Meanwhile, REST, an ad hoc group of volunteers from several North Shore churches, was looking for individuals and families to sponsor here in North Vancouver. Bukhari was their first candidate. REST has now assisted more than 30 people to settle in the lower mainland - folks who work, study, and contribute to their communities in many ways; a number of them now also qualify for citizenship. The group has sponsored several individuals with disabilities, and some who were at particular risk while waiting to be accepted in a safe country.

Bukhari arrived in Canada in 2016 as a blind man of colour without much knowledge of English, although he was fluent in Somali, Arabic and spoken Swahili. He became good friends with the first Syrian family also sponsored by REST and has remained close to his original sponsors and advocates. He has lived in North Vancouver, East Vancouver and now Surrey. Over several years, he determined that his sight was not recoverable, which was a terrible blow. However, Bukhari maintains a very positive attitude, is able to live independently, and navigates well with a white cane and a very accessible transit system.

Lots to contribute

He is the first of REST's sponsorships to achieve his Canadian citizenship. He continues his English studies, volunteers at a local mosque, and hopes that he can find meaningful work as he develops his office skills - as a person with no sight, his biggest challenge is finding employment that can accommodate his disability.

REST and other non-profit organizations work hard to help newcomers settle in our community. The determination to live an independent life and to contribute to community that Bukhari and other refugee arrivals demonstrate in spades is nurtured and encouraged by organizations such as Impact North Shore (formerly North Shore Multicultural Society), where newcomers can access settlement services, school and employment support, English language learning opportunities and community connections. Many faith communities are deeply committed to assuring new arrivals are welcomed and supported, regardless of their own religious affiliations.

During Black History month in Canada, I congratulate Bukhari, a new Black Canadian, as he joins our diverse family - and I encourage us all to assure inclusivity is built into our work ethic and our education systems. Every Canadian, including Bukhari, deserves our support to live their best life.

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