

Danita and Michel Aziza
Trying to Do Good in Their Community and in the World
by
Brian Campbell

Working hard to give back and support their community is nothing new to Danita and Michel Aziza. Danita grew up with and has made a tradition of serving her community, no matter where that community may have been.

She says, “My parents were always involved in the community in some level, and I have an adopted brother who had special needs, and he taught me the value of compassion and caring and thinking outside of yourself. So it was part of my DNA.

“I was always involved with something, whether it was a youth group or a community event,” she added. “When we first came to Winnipeg in 2002, I didn’t know anybody, so I went to the Jewish Federation and said, ‘I’m used to volunteering, I have been a volunteer for many years in Toronto. Is there something I can do?’”

That began a relationship that has spanned many years. Danita started out volunteering and serving on the Board of the Jewish Federation, then she served on the Board of Jewish Education.

Then she found a cause that became very close to her heart. “I was very concerned about the rate of poverty in our community,” she said. “So I started working on the Half Shekel Task Force on Poverty, which was a joint venture between the Jewish Federation and Jewish Child and Family Service (JCFS).”

Danita spent the next two years on the Half Shekel Task Force, until 2008, when her family moved to Israel for four years. When she returned to Winnipeg in 2012, she discovered that the rate of poverty had increased, so she volunteered at JCFS and is now the President of their Board of Directors.

Danita has seen a lot of need in her community and in the world as a whole. Not only does this give her a great desire to help, she also feels that people need to be aware that help is available for them.

“All people have their issues, no matter where they live, no matter what their income level is,” Danita says. “But there is something comforting in knowing that you are not the only one with issues, that it is ok to talk about your problems, and that there are qualified resources available in your community that can help you with the challenges you are facing.”

Michel, now retired, has also picked up Danita’s desire to volunteer in the community. Even though Michel hasn’t volunteered as regularly as Danita has, when he chooses to take on a project, he jumps in with both feet. He joined a project called ‘Operation Ezra’ which is helping to support the Yazidi people from the current conflict in Iraq and Syria.

“Operation Ezra began as a grassroots project, but we quickly realized that there was potential for something much bigger. However, we needed to find ways to extend our reach,” Michel said. “The first organization we approached was JCFS and they came on board as a lead organization. Now we have about 20 agencies on board and Operation Ezra now encompasses the entire Winnipeg community. We are currently trying to make it a national project. This is the only project of its kind, designed to privately sponsor larger numbers of Yazidi refugees to Canada.

“So far we have submitted applications for seven families, 42 people, and we are working on the eighth family now,” he added. “It isn’t much, so far, but we will certainly change the lives of 50 people, and eventually that will have an impact on many generations.”

The Yazidi people are recognized as one of the oldest ethnic minorities in the world and have faced religious persecution for over 700 years. “These people are at risk of extinction,” Michel said. “Their roots are in northern Iraq and Kurdistan and their religion is over 6,000 years old. They used to number 23 million people and now they are under 700,000.”

Many organizations have come together to support Operation Ezra. The Mennonite Central Committee, The Manitoba Multi Faith Council and Salvation Army, among many others, have all actively participated in this project. People donated personal items, Ikea donated household goods, Rady Jewish Community Centre

brought three of the Yazidi children into their day camp while their family settled in, and much more.

“I think that it is a historic undertaking, when all of the community organizations have come together to work on this project,” Danita said.

“I believe that it is our Jewish values and our human values that propelled us to help these people in need. It wasn’t very long ago that a large part of the Jewish people were in need of help,” Michel added. “Some people chose to help and some chose not to. From this we have learned the importance of helping others in need. This was an opportunity to reach out to people who are in need much like our people were. In fact, it is heartwarming to see so many individuals in this city and across the country, who are very willing to contribute in some way.

“There is a Yazidi family in Iraq, a single mother with five girls, she lost her husband and son in the war, who is now at great risk of being kidnapped by ISIS. They have no hope and they need help,” Michel said. “When you hear a story like this, how can you not care? The challenge is that we need to raise more funds to be able to assist in a meaningful and productive way.”

“By and large, people want to help, they want to feel that they are going beyond themselves,” Danita said. “JCFS provides people with that opportunity. People connect to the agency because they want to do good, they want to help make our community and our families stronger.

“When I was working at a table collecting donations for Passover food hampers for JCFS, an Argentinian couple came to the table and gave a very generous donation. Then they looked at me and said, ‘Once we were recipients of the Passover food basket’,” Danita recalls.

“Winnipeg is a very giving and special community,” Michel said.

“We have lived in many, many different places,” Danita added. “There is something incredibly special about Winnipeg. The opportunity to connect to community and do things that matter is so accessible.”

Michel and Danita have years of travel experience between them, and many homes they can compare Winnipeg to. They have seen a lot of the world, both separately and together. Neither started out living in Winnipeg; Michel was born in Morocco, his family moved to France while he was a child. As an adult he immigrated to Toronto, where he met and married Danita.

Danita was born in Moose-Jaw, Saskatchewan and moved to Calgary when she was eight. She moved to Toronto to attend university and met Michel there. Together they moved to Boston, where Michel took a graduate degree in business. Then it was back to Toronto, before heading to Winnipeg, where Michel took a job with New Flyer. But it didn't end there.

“We took a sabbatical to Israel for one year, which turned into four years,” Michel said with a smile. “Then we came back to Winnipeg and I think that we are now here to stay.”

Outside of their volunteer time, Michel and Danita are very busy spending time with their children, Rachel (19) who is going to University of Winnipeg and dances with the Chai Folk Ensemble and performed at the Israel Pavilion in Folklorama; Benjamin (24) who is going to University of Manitoba and spent three months of the spring and summer studying at the Institute for Counterterrorism in Tel Aviv; and Tali (26) who lives in Toronto, just graduated with a Master's degree in Social Work and was recently married.

Danita loves walking their dogs through the neighbourhood. “It is a beautiful, green, quiet and healthy neighbourhood,” she said, “It is a friendly, welcoming, helpful, healthy place to live.”

“It is a great community,” Michel added. “In all the places we've lived, we've never lived in a community like this. It is a very friendly neighbourhood.”

Danita believes that everyone is able to enrich their lives by giving back to their community. She says, “Everybody is looking for happiness, and sometimes you can achieve happiness by reaching out and doing something good for somebody else, such as donating to a charity that speaks to you, by giving of your time, or donating services.”

Both Michel and Danita plan to continue supporting their community, whether that community is Tuxedo, Winnipeg, Canada or the world in general; and whether it is through Operation Ezra, JCFS or whatever project stirs their hearts. Danita said, “There is so much need out there, you always need to push yourself to do more.”