

The Women's Press

Women in Hamilton, Raising our Voices.

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Family battles to stay together



"I am worried that this would leave a lasting scar on my children. We've always kept together as a family."

- Ian Wilkie

WOMEN'S PRESS

[Left] Yusuf, Zaynab and Fatima rallied in front of Hamilton's Bay St. N. Federal building to push for the release of their mother, Wafaa Abdou. Abdou has been held in detention since January.

Hamilton native Ian Wilkie did not expect to face such resistance keeping his family together in Canada, his home country. Father to three children, ages six to 11, Wilkie is facing an uphill legal battle as he fights for his Egyptian wife Wafaa Abdou to be released from immigration detention.

Wilkie met Abdou when he was working as an English teacher at an American language centre in Egypt; she was his next-door neighbour. They eventually were married in 2001 and settled down in Damascus, the capital

"It has been a nightmare process ever since."

of Syria. Civil unrest in Syria propelled him to leave the country and his job. As the situation became more violent, Wilkie brought Abdou and his children back to Canada.

Returning home after living 17 years in the Middle East, Wilkie went to the local Citizenship and Immigration Canada office, intending to file for an application to sponsor his wife and family.

During the visit, he said he was informed he had insufficient funds to do so, and instead, that his wife was encouraged to apply for refugee status.

Abdou followed the recommendation, which was a decision the couple would soon regret.

"It has been a nightmare process ever since," exclaimed Wilkie.

Routine appointments with immigration officials are a standard procedure for refugee claimants. However, on Jan. 14

in Mississauga, it was revealed that Abdou's refugee claim was rejected.

As they were leaving the

appointment, three men with guns stopped them, said Wilkie.

"One of them put his hand on the gun and said 'Don't make me use force.'"

"One of them put his hand on the gun and said, 'Don't make me use force,'" recalled Wilkie. Abdou was declared a "flight risk" two days later. Officials believed she was at risk of fleeing with her children to escape deportation.

Abdou was taken into custody at the Mississauga facility, where she continued to be interrogated.

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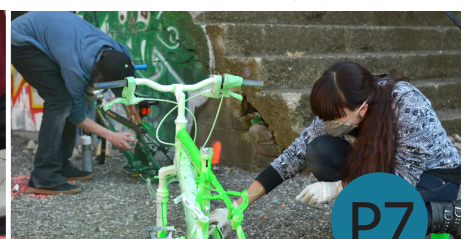
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Celebrating Difference Youth poets find outlet for expression at Hamilton Youth Poetry Slam



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Seeking Sanctuary Children build self-esteem and cooperation at 'KidsAbility' program



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Spike My Bike Creative and practical, youth at RE-create studio turn bicycles into art with spraypaint and flair

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'Re-unite the Wilkie family'



SUBMITTED PHOTO

[Left] Ian Wilkie lives in fear of his wife's looming deportation.

[Above] Mother of three Canadian children, Wafaa Abdou fights to remain with her family.

WOMEN'S PRESS

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The process was demeaning, said Wilkie. Abdou told her husband that her head coverings were removed and she was strip-searched and photographed in cubicles at all angles.

Pressured by the officials, Abdou signed a document agreeing to be deported on Feb. 15. Otherwise, she was told, her children would be put into foster care.

However, local MP David Christopherson and his staff intervened. They discovered the paperwork filled out by officials was incomplete and therefore her initial deportation date was invalid. The staff requested that Minister Kenney allow Abdou to stay and to be provided with a temporary residence permit. A new deportation date was set for April 27, which was also the day Yusuf, the family's only son, turned 9.

Although the attempt to deport Abdou was initially stalled, Wilkie continued to draw attention to the

unjust immigration system. A protest for Abdou's release was held on International Women's Day on March 8 in front of the local Citizenship and Immigration office at Bay Street North. Between 50 to 60 people attended and about 100 people also rallied in support of the Wilkie family on April 19.

The Hamilton and District Labour Council also stepped forward to assist. They requested Jason Kenney, the Minister of Citizenship, Immigration and Multiculturalism, to release Abdou from detention, stop her deportation on April 27 and grant her temporary residence status on humanitarian and compassionate grounds.

"The best solution to the problem is to shine a light on that problem," insisted Wilkie, describing the decision to organize a rally on behalf of his wife.

"There's this growing outcry and anger of these recent changes

to Canadian immigration policy," said Wilkie.

"I think women are the softest target in this kind of situations. They [immigration officials] used my children as leverage to pressure her," he added.

If anything, Wilkie's story shows how important it is to obtain legal

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advice before starting an application for immigration, said John Norquay, an immigrant and refugee lawyer in Toronto. "The reality is that Canada's immigration system is not friendly or straightforward...Navigating it requires very thoughtful planning

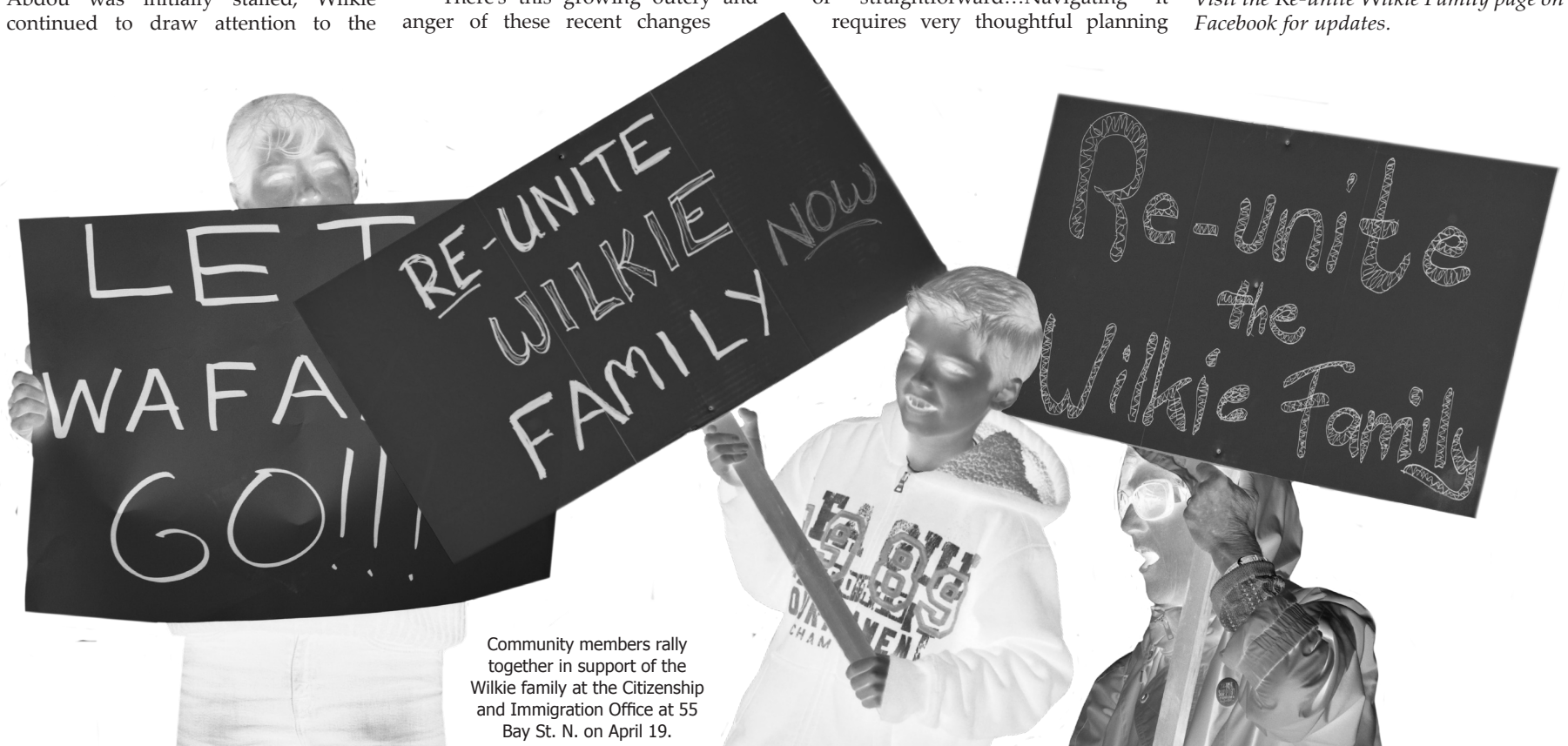
and advice from counsel who knows all the facts," he wrote in an email.

"If someone chooses the wrong option — for example, a non-refugee making a refugee claim — it is very difficult to undo the consequences of that choice later on," he said. Norquay advises applicants seek independent advice from legal counsel to complete their immigration applications following the proper procedures.

For Wilkie, this mistake has a heavy price to pay. It was a painful moment as the children said goodbye to their mother through a glass barrier at the Mississauga detention centre the Friday before she boarded the plane to Cairo on April 27.

"I am worried that this would live a lasting scar on my children. We've always kept together as a family."

■ *Alyssa Lai, Women's Press.*
Visit the *Re-unite Wilkie Family* page on Facebook for updates.



Community members rally together in support of the Wilkie family at the Citizenship and Immigration Office at 55 Bay St. N. on April 19.