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Three Torontonians taking their turn in the spotlight this Christmas

A 9-year-old refugee. A dedicated church volunteer. An aspiring ballerina whose whole family takes part in a Christmas classic. We profile three of the people who make Toronto's holiday pageants shine.



Eileen Rojas, 9, plays an angel in Church of the Holy Trinity's annual Christmas pageant. Her family came to Toronto this year after fleeing violence in Colombia. (COLE BURSTON / TORONTO STAR) | [ORDER THIS PHOTO](#)

By [DONOVAN VINCENT](#) News reporter
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Must be an angel

It's just past supper hour and some cast members have gathered at Toronto's Church of the Holy Trinity to rehearse for their upcoming Christmas pageant.

It's all hands on deck, so Elizabeth Raybould, the assistant producer/director of the nativity play, is subbing as a makeup artist, putting some eyeshadow on Eileen Rojas and styling the girl's long dark hair.

Dressed as an angel, Eileen, 9, then heads downstairs toward the stage and giggles with excitement, scampering barefoot across the church floor in her costume — a white robe with a gold-coloured sash.

Holy Trinity sponsored Eileen; her 10-year-old brother, Miguel; 6-year-old sister, Sara; and mom, Luz, to come to Canada as refugees this spring. They were displaced by violence in Quindio, Colombia, and fled to Ecuador in September 2013, then landed here in April.

In early December, members of the downtown church asked Eileen if she wanted to be an angel in their 78th annual performance of *The Christmas Story*.

The youngster jumped at the opportunity.

"I felt happy — I've never done anything like this before," the first-time performer says in Spanish as a translator stands by. Before coming to Toronto, Eileen had never even attended school.

And at one point in the Christmas show, she'll raise her arms above her head triumphantly, a moment she says she's looking forward to.

It's a far cry from the grinding poverty and hopelessness Eileen and her family faced before coming here.

After fleeing to Ecuador, the family lived on the street for a while. Luz had to beg for money to feed her children.

Her husband disappeared after the family left Colombia, and his whereabouts are unknown.

The family had to pick through rags and refuse looking for anything to salvage for money. "(Eileen) would rummage through the garbage looking for cans," Luz says. "She's a toughie."

Eventually, a charitable group gave Luz a stove and some pots and pans, and she started selling empanadas on the street. She also sold sweets on buses and at stoplights — all with her children in tow.

The family came here through Canada's Joint Assistance Sponsorship Program, which supports government-assisted refugees who face special needs. The Rojas clan qualified because youngest daughter Sara has cerebral palsy.

The program allows groups to act as private sponsors for refugees. Holy Trinity's refugee committee is one such group. It provides friendship and settlement support such as translation services and assistance in finding housing and health care.

Since 1991, Holy Trinity has sponsored 125 refugees from war-torn countries such as Afghanistan, Burundi, Cambodia, Colombia, Iran, Kosovo, Somalia and Sudan.

When they first arrived, Eileen and her family lived in a shelter. In July they moved to their own apartment. Eileen is enrolled in Grade 4 in a Toronto public school.

She and her family are now permanent residents and their next step will be applying for Canadian citizenship.

"We really felt compelled by their story," says H el ene Gr egoire, a volunteer with the church's refugee committee who translated during the Star's interview with Eileen.

"A single mom, travelling with three children, fleeing violence. We knew they'd need a lot of support."

Susan Watson, the director of the church pageant, notes that the nativity play touches on the refugee theme because according to the biblical story, Mary and Joseph fled Jerusalem for Egypt to protect the baby Jesus from the ruler Herod.

"They were refugees 2,000 years ago," she says.

The play lasts just over an hour. It's a Friday-to-Sunday production running until Dec. 20.

Just over 100 volunteers are involved in putting on the pageant, and all of the performers onstage are volunteers.

There's a strong sense of community among the cast members, Watson says, adding that the play afforded Eileen the opportunity to form new friendships.

"Many children find this play a really fun experience because they don't have to learn any lines. It's narrated. For children even for whom English is their mother tongue, public speaking can be a real stress and take the fun out of the theatre.

"This way, they have all the fun of putting on a costume and the makeup, and being onstage and having friends and family come to see them."

Asked if she'll be nervous when it's time to face a live audience, Eileen says "*no mucho*" — not much.



Pianist and singer James Doucette has volunteered with the Christmas pageant at Timothy Eaton Memorial Church for 11 years. This time he plays a singing shepherd. (CARLOS OSORIO)

The good shepherd

James Doucette doesn't consider himself a religious person.

But he'll be performing as a singing shepherd in the nativity play at Timothy Eaton Memorial Church on Christmas Eve, a pageant he has taken part in for the past 11 years.

For 27-year-old Doucette, who has played various roles including Joseph and one of the three wise men, the play isn't about worshipping a supreme being.

He does it because it makes him feel connected to other people and for a love of music he has nurtured since growing up in Downsview.

He first saw the Timothy Eaton show when he was 16, after being introduced to the church's music program through a friend who sang in the choir.

"The first year ... there was a moment where there were over 1,000 people singing 'Silent Night,' " he recalls. "It was a beautiful moment.

"I just realized maybe it's not necessarily about believing in one figure, it's about the community and everyone coming together."

He's not a member of the congregation but Doucette is active in programming at the church. For the past seven years, the pianist and singer has volunteered with Spirit Express, an eight-month musical theatre program at Timothy Eaton that teaches local youth in grades 8 through 12 the basics of theatre and singing.

He co-ordinates music and is a vocal coach in the program. Several young people in the program participate in the Christmas play.

Doucette says he's thrilled to be able to give the gift of music back to the community through the pageant and youth group.

He sang in a vocal ensemble in high school and played clarinet during those years, but there were limitations on his access to music. For one thing, the music program at school was drying up at the time, he recalls. And private lessons were largely out of reach for the family, led by a single mother.

He helped out at home where he could and took on an evening retail job with close to full-time hours when he was 16. He wanted to help his mom with the bills and have some spending money. Meanwhile, he still did musical theatre and choir.

"I was a busy, busy person," he says.

But he successfully completed high school and now holds down several jobs, including managing restaurants and teaching music at a few other churches.

Mallary Davenport, director of the Timothy Eaton pageant, credits professionally trained contributors such as Doucette for helping maintain the quality of the annual production, which involves 150 volunteers.

She noted the spectacle, which has been performed at the church for more than two decades, also features some performers of the four-legged

persuasion — camels, donkeys, sheep and goats.

One year a donkey stopped during the show and refused to budge while it urinated inside the church, Davenport recalls, laughing.

Animals aside, Doucette likens the group that collaborates on the pageant to “a family ... I’ve made some best friends here.

Later, he adds: “I know every Christmas who I’m going to get to see. It’s our little get-together. It’s a lot of fun.”



Hannah Lowe fell in love with *The Nutcracker* when she first saw it at age 3. She is performing in her ninth season of the Pia Bouman School's production of the ballet. (ANDREW FRANCIS WALLACE)

A Sugar Plum Fairy tale

She was only 3, but Hannah Lowe was smitten when she saw her first performance of *The Nutcracker*.

“I saw it at the National Ballet of Canada and I loved it so much I wouldn’t stop dancing around the house afterward,” the 15-year-old recalls.

That was December 2003. Three weeks later, her parents enrolled her in classes at the Pia Bouman School for Ballet and Creative Movement, a not-for-profit dance academy in Parkdale.

Now, more than a decade later, Lowe has key roles in the school’s amateur production of the classic Christmas spectacle. She’ll play the Snow Queen and the Sugar Plum Fairy in two of the four shows, ending Sunday.

“*The Nutcracker* has always been my favourite ballet,” she says. “It holds a special place in my heart. The Sugar Plum Fairy, the costumes and the music I’ve always known.”

Lowe started performing in the school’s production when she was 6, and this marks her ninth year in the annual show.

She’s also busy helping to sew costumes, overseeing warm-ups for the young children in the performance and helping to collect and archive old photos of *The Nutcracker* to mark the company’s 30th anniversary of the ballet.

Between her own dancing and assisting with the pageant, Lowe estimates she’s at the school four to eight hours every weekend during “*Nutcracker* season” — late September to December.

And when it’s not that time of year the advanced-level ballerina is at Pia Bouman five days a week doing eight or nine ballet classes.

She also gets a private coaching every other week.

“I’m probably here 15 hours a week,” she says. “It’s a lot.”

How does a teenager set aside the time to do all of this while balancing her school work? Lowe is in Grade 10 and is home schooled by her mother, Kathryn Smith.

“I do school from 9:30 a.m. until whenever I have to leave the house that day, which can be from 3:30 to 5:30 p.m.,” Hannah says. “I have an allotted

amount of work I have to get done in a week. If I'm behind, I have to do some work when I get home from dance at night. I'm a bit of a night owl."

She does some online courses and others designed by her mom.

"She is a really responsible, hard-working, focused and self-directed girl, so I wouldn't say she has any trouble balancing it all," says Smith, 42.

Mom is also involved in *The Nutcracker*, doing costume co-ordination.

In fact it's a family affair.

Hannah's grandfather Tony Smith, 80, the oldest performer in the pageant, is playing the grandfather of Clara, the pivotal character.

Hannah's two younger sisters are also in the one-hour, 20-minute production, which will be mounted at Humberside Collegiate Institute.

Clare, 11, has multiple roles including a doll, and Nora, 10, has roles that include playing a friend of Fritz, Clara's brother.

Hannah's father, Iain Lowe, 46, helps out at the refreshment table during performances.

(Hannah's brother Hamish, 13, attends Canada's National Ballet School, whose students participate in the National Ballet's annual production of *The Nutcracker*).

Pia Bouman, 73, the founder and director of the school that bears her name, calls Hannah a role model and a mentor to others at the school, especially the younger dancers in *The Nutcracker*.

"It's impressive what someone like that can pull off," Bouman says.

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