

St. Patrick's is 175 years young

Montreal's oldest cultural organization, St. Patrick's Society, is celebrating its 175th anniversary this year (preceding the St. Jean Baptiste Society by three months). Its antecedents date back much farther, legend being that the Irish discovered North America years before the Norsemen. The first Irish to settle in Canada were soldiers serving in the Irish Brigade of Montcalm's army. Irish soldiers from the British Army followed suit. Thus began a longstanding Irish integration into both of Canada's founding cultures.

By the early nineteenth century, the Irish population in Montreal was in full expansion, its merchants having established a thriving commercial presence in the city. A group of citizens decided that a formal Irish organization was necessary, to unite members of this burgeoning community and to sustain their traditional values. On March 17, 1834, the St. Patrick's Society came into being.

Over the years, the Society has maintained a high profile. The annual ball, St. Patrick's Day luncheon, and the Irish film series, Cine Gael, are key activities. The Centre for Canadian Irish Studies, at Concordia University, is internationally recognized.

And there are good works. "We've always been concerned with the cultural, educational and social needs of our community," affirms **Patrick Shea**, past president and chair of the charitable giving committee. "That embraces the community at large. Over recent decades, we've donated hundreds of thousands of dollars to charitable causes."

The Society raises funds through special events and endowments to help a wide range of groups – seniors' centres, children's summer camps, soup kitchens, a refugee centre. "We try particularly to help the smaller, grassroots organizations," says Shea, "those that don't get the big grants."

The Society has been holding consultations for several months to develop a vision for the future. That will be discussed at a general meeting in April.

Hope for the mentally ill homeless

The Mental Health Commission of Canada is sponsoring a nation-wide study of mental illness among the homeless. Research projects are being set up in five cities, which are to collectively develop a body of evidence to define how best to help these people. The Commission reasons that such a knowledge base will spur government decision-makers to take appropriate action in the future.

The projects are guided by the premise that mentally ill homeless people will respond better to intervention if they have a safe place to live. That is the start-off point for the four-year Montreal project. "We hope to make available up to 300 lodgings," explains **Sonia Coté**, project coordinator. "We're now beginning to assemble a team of 22 professionals who will carry out the studies and we'll be working with the principal shelters in the city to identify people who could participate. The project should be under way by September."

Busy times in the East End

The East Island Network for English-language Services has been making steady progress on a variety of healthcare issues:

- A February forum brought together diabetes experts and English-speaking community organizers from across the province to exchange information and develop strategies for the future.
- A program of drug awareness and substance abuse detection in the schools has so far reached 4500 anglophone students.
- A play about the problems of anxiety among anglophone students will be broadcast via video-conferencing to 12 regions of Quebec.
- A new respite program for anglophone caregivers of dementia sufferers has been implemented in a local seniors' centre.
- A new guide on available English-language services has been provided to local CSSSs for referring anglophone patients to care.

Caregiver campaign to catch attention

An “edgy and hard hitting” campaign will be launched in May to bring caregiving into the spotlight. Managed through the CSSS Cavendish and directed by the Care-ring Voice Network, the issue will be subject of a multi-media blitz through the summer. It’s designed to attract attention and to make a major impact on public attitudes and policies.

“Caregiving is an important social issue that must be addressed and positively affected through some kind of concrete change,” says **Mark Stolor**, project manager. “We want to evoke a reaction from caregivers, from professionals working with them, and from policy makers. The issue has received some media attention, but it’s still very much in the shadows. This campaign will be a call to action.”

Stolor believes that the word caregiver itself poses a problem because it is somewhat vague and can mean different things to different people. The campaign will approach the subject from a unique angle, connecting the public with the experience of what it means to be a caregiver.

“We’re going to be talking less about caregiving and more on the expectations placed on the family,” says Stolor. “We’ll be informing the larger population just what it means when responsibility for care falls almost 100 percent on the family, and what the impact of that is. We’ll help them to understand why those families are so often overwhelmed, so stressed out. By hammering home that message, we’re aiming to change attitudes and to influence social behaviours.”

The Care-ring Voice network is a coalition of 15 organizations that host telephone conferences among healthcare professionals and caregivers. Since it was launched in 2004, the network has hosted over 200 sessions, reaching some 10,000 families.

The network hopes to forge new partnerships with organizations with a national mandate to take this campaign across the country. For more information: www.caringvoice.com .

Radio brings them together

A small group of itinerant women are developing new self-confidence and making friends as they gather every week to discuss issues on the radio. Par-Celles is a weekly web-radio program produced entirely by present and past residents of Auberge Madeleine, a short-term shelter for women in trouble. Set up as a one-year pilot on community radio, the project was so successful that the Auberge decided that it should continue.

“There are so many positive aspects to this program,” says **Sari Chengberlin**, agency worker. “It gives these women a chance to express themselves, to voice their concerns and ideas. Meeting and working with other women helps to alleviate their loneliness. It’s also a good way for the Auberge workers to better understand them and their needs. And it can sensitize the public to the reality that these women are facing.”

There is a different topic each month: recent programs touched on love, mental health and re-integration into society. Each week, the women decide what aspect of the topic they want to cover and write personal commentaries or poetry to read on air. They then discuss the topic. The programs are broadcast on www.choq.fm/madeleine.html . For further information: 514 597 1303.p

Coaching community leaders

Centraide of Greater Montreal and its project partner Centre 1,2,3 GO!, have just completed their second Bridging Leadership Support Program. The program is designed to improve the skills of Centraide agency directors in bridging gaps that can exist among different players in the community.

Participants are coached on how to take the lead in bringing together partners with different cultures, values and practices. The ultimate goal is to reconcile diverging views and to foster collaboration among the people of a community to ensure that cooperative projects will succeed.

They want women to speak out

In 1995 a group of six women, survivors of domestic violence, decided to extend their support group to help other women experiencing the same problem. Women Aware (abused women advocating for rights and equality) is now a registered charitable organization helping abused women in Montreal. It is a service that is sadly needed. Some 6500 cases of domestic abuse are reported every year in this city.

“But just think of the numbers that are not being reported,” says **June Michell**, one of the organization’s founders. “Our goal is to break the silence that shrouds domestic violence, to encourage those women to make that first crucial call for help. Our motto is that there’s no excuse for abuse.”

There are several ways that Women Aware gets out the message. Workshops on domestic violence are held both on and off-site – in answer to many requests from the community. They oversee several support groups and run an emergency drop-in centre. They now receive up to 60 calls a month on their telephone support line (514 489 1110).

“We know how important it is to go beyond just solving an immediate crisis in order to find long-term solutions,” Michell affirms. “We work with lay and professional volunteers, and have an advisory panel of police, psychologists, and community organization representatives. So we can direct women to the resources that are available to them.”

Women Aware lobbied successfully to have the Quebec civil code amended to enable abused women who have resorted to emergency shelters to break their lease. They also provide accompaniment to court hearings, so important for immigrant women.

Prevention is another cause. Women Aware holds workshops for children from grade 6 to the CGEP level. “These are real awareness sessions,” says Michell. “Some boys and girls aren’t very clear on what the boundaries are concerning dating violence. Their definition of what is acceptable behaviour is frightening.” For further information: 514 908 9014.

Big friends for lonely seniors

Big Brothers and Big Sisters of Greater Montreal, long known for its mentoring programs with children, is expanding its mandate to find friends for lonely seniors. In a pilot project launched last September, the agency is pairing volunteers with elderly Montrealers who would like companionship. Called Par-Aîné, the project is funded through **Margaret Blais**, Minister responsible for seniors.

“The project was actually the idea of Société de gestion Cogir, a company that owns and manages seniors’ residences,” explains **Hélène Deschamps**, project coordinator. “They came to us because of our experience in organizing pairings and our expertise in screening volunteers.”

Applicants for volunteering must undergo a rigorous selection process that includes a lengthy personal interview, a questionnaire and a criminal background check. If selected, they are given special training on how to deal with the elderly.

“We pair people with common interests,” explains Deschamps, “because they decide themselves what activities they want. We ask the volunteer for a minimum of two hours once a week, but some spend more time. After each meeting, we do a follow up with both parties to see if they’re satisfied. There are 20 elderly men and women participating in the pilot. If it proves successful, we can see it expanding.” For further information: 514 842 9715, ext. 333.

St Anne’s expands

St. Anne’s Hospital for veterans will be opening a new clinic for military personnel with psychological injuries in the fall. It will treat patients with a range of mental problems, including anxiety disorders, depression and addiction. The 10-bed facility is designed for veterans, members of the Canadian Forces and the Royal Mounted Canadian Police. It is the first of 10 such clinics to be opened across the country. Its \$1.1 million operating budget is funded by the Department of Veterans Affairs.

McConnell suspends new funding

The J.W. McConnell Family Foundation, Canada's second largest private foundation, will not be considering requests for funding for the foreseeable future. In light of the current financial situation, the Foundation has decided to maintain support to existing partners, rather than take on new commitments. It will continue to support initiatives currently under way, as well as any complimentary work, where necessary.

Montreal receives money for poverty

The Quebec government announced in February that it will provide \$24 million to Montreal to combat poverty and social exclusion, a 60 percent increase over its previous three-year funding agreement. The city will receive \$7 million this year and \$8 million during the two following years. The funds will be directed to community organizations dealing with the city's disadvantaged.

Canada lagging in child care

Canada is tied in last place, with Ireland, among 25 first-world countries rated by UNICEF for their level of child care. The study compared 25 members of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). This country met only one of the UN agency's 10 benchmarks setting minimum standards for protecting the rights of children. That was that 50 percent of its early education staff is educated with relevant qualifications. Among the unmet criteria, Canada failed to attain a child-poverty rate of less than 10 percent.

Budget bypasses volunteers

Volunteer Canada has criticized the federal government for overlooking the voluntary sector in its recent budget: "An investment in this sector and its 12 million volunteers would not only create new jobs and added economic stimulus, but it would address the needs of those who are most vulnerable during these difficult times."

In brief

Evelyn Joncas has been named coordinator of Training and Consultation at the Volunteer Bureau of Montreal.

Robert Martini has been elected vice-president of the Montreal region advisory committee on English-language services.

Bruno Mital has been named managing director of CCS (Catholic Community Services).

Cyril Morgan has been elected president of the Montreal region advisory committee on English-language services.

National Volunteer Week is to be held April 19 to 25. This year's theme is [A passion for action](#) .

Nominations are open for the Alan Thomas Fellowship, an award of \$50,000 to provide a sabbatical to an outstanding leader in the NGO/nonprofit sector who would not normally have access to sabbatical leave. Deadline is March 27. For further information: www.carold.ca .

Grant requests are being solicited by the Sam Solomon Trust Fund for Underprivileged Children. Deadline is April 30. For further information: www.jcfmontreal.org .

Nominations are open for the Bishop Crowley Memorial Award, for outstanding achievement by a person or organization serving the English-speaking Catholic community. Deadline is April 14. For further information: esc@bellnet.ca .

The Information and Referral Centre of Greater Montreal has published its 2009 directories on [Food Resources for Low Income People](#) and on [Self-help Groups in Montreal](#). For information: 514 527 1375.

The editor welcomes story ideas: 514 937 4309

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