

Mae Sot Education Project Newsletter Spring 2017

www.maesot.ubishops.ca For more information, contact us at <u>maesoteducationproiect@gmail.com</u>

Fundraising: Our raffle, our Thai-Burmese benefit supper and then... coming in August, MSEP's first ever Golf Tournament

We need your support:



Donate a prize or sponsor a hole or... make your own team and play on August 12th! For more information contact Emily Prangley Desormeaux at

<u>em.desormeaux@gmail.com</u>

Save April 29th!

The Mae Sot Education Project

invites you to attend its annual

Gourmet Thai-Burmese Benefit Supper With music, silent auction, raffle & talks by volunteers

> Saturday, April 29th, 6:30 p.m. Oasis Christian Centre 219 Queen Street, Lennoxville Tickets \$50

Contact project committee members for tickets. A tax receipt for charitable donation will be given for \$30. If you are unable to attend but would like to support our project, donations are always welcome!



Introducing Our 2017-18 Volunteer Team

This winter and spring Brianna Peterson, Katharine McKenney, Dania Paradis-Bouffard and Loïc Arguin-Mercier (from left to right in the photo) are working hard, preparing to represent MSEP in Mae Sot. Though busy now, lesson planning, finding their way around on bikes, and getting to know the children and teachers at the six migrant schools with which we partner will keep them *more* than busy once they land in Thailand in June.

A Song with No Comforting Refrain

By Felix Duplessis Marcotte, 2016 Volunteer

I have always seen life as music. In every song you can find verses and a chorus. If you want to know how to sing or play the song, you just need to pay attention to the repeating pattern. The verses are like new experiences: discoveries and uncertainties. In many songs, they are unpredictable and more difficult to sing along with. You just live the moment and see what will happen next, what will be the next word, the next rhyme. The chorus is the part you've already heard, the part you can predict and know what words are coming next, almost as if you had written the lines yourself. The chorus is in some ways the heartwarming part of a song: you know it by heart and can sing it out loud.

But what if, for some people, life isn't melodious at all? What if it resembles more a melancholy cacophony, a life made up of only verses, built on no stable pattern with no hook to hold on to, no heartwarming refrain. Yet though the songs have no refrain, the people cannot refrain from dancing on the ambiguous fine line of the border, close to hitting a bum note on one side or the other.



Felix with Htoo Kaw

Teaching at Parami Learning Centre, I realised that using English songs would be the best way to catch the interest of the students as their passion for music was quite obvious. In my grade 10 class, after teaching the song *Imagine* by John Lennon and *Hero of War* by Rise Against, both of which touch on the theme of war that is familiar to Burmese people, a student named Htoo Kaw asked me many questions. He soon became my guardian angel and my best friend. After numerous spicy lunch times that we spent learning more about each other, I found out that war is an issue he has faced way too often in his life. Having the desire to know more about one another, we decided to sit together one night, pen and paper in hand, and ask questions about our lives just like journalists do. What follows is a very brief summary of his young and too experienced life of 19 years.

Htoo Kaw has three older brothers and one younger sister. Two of his brothers work near Bangkok in markets to make money for the family. The other is still in Myanmar working in the rice fields with his mom in Zeephyugone (Bago state). Because the three brothers work to earn money for the family, his sister has the chance to study in Myanmar. Htoo Kaw did not have this chance because education was too expensive for all the children in his family to study at the time. His father died when he was about 5 years old because of a disease he could not name. To explain, he opened his biology

book on female anatomy and pointed at the ovary. "Isn't this the female sex organ, Htoo Kaw?" I asked. He seemed to notice nothing wrong in showing me the female diagram, so I presumed his father probably died of prostate cancer.

Since he was born, life has been very dangerous in Myanmar. Burmese soldiers would come to his village for food and shelter. If they did not have enough food, the soldiers would shoot people, destroy their houses and gardens, hit children and sexually assault women. Sometimes, the soldiers made their camp around the village. Karen soldiers would also come to defend his village, but where there are soldiers, there is war. I heard this story coming from Htoo Kaw more than once, and every time I could feel a very strong anger burning in his heart. Holding back his tears he finished by telling me that, "Government is not good, teacher. When I will go back, I will shoot them."

At 10 years old, most children are driven to school by mom or dad, play with friends, and are picked up at the end of the day. However, for Htoo Kaw, age 10 was the year when he talked to his mother for the last time. He was walking with his cousin in the forest to find food for his family. They knew that Burmese soldiers were very close and ready to shoot them if they went out of the village, but they had no choice. They had to go in the forest to find food with soldiers running after them, or they could stay in their village and starve. Htoo Kaw heard gunfire. He turned back and saw his cousin lying on the ground

in agony. Soldiers were shouting, shooting and running closer. There was nothing to do but to run as fast and as far as he could to escape and save his life in the depths of the jungle.

Htoo Kaw lived two years on his own in the jungle, finding others in the same situation. With the strong desire for revenge and the unstoppable state of mind of a 12 year old boy, he joined some Karen soldiers for a two months training. However, the Karen army does not accept soldiers under 18 to fight. Disappointed, he walked for few more days and luckily arrived in the village where his aunt was living. He told his aunt that he really wanted to get an education and go to school, so she left with him for Thailand. She went to Mae La Refugee Camp while he went to Parami Learning Centre where I had the good luck to meet him.

When I talked with Htoo Kaw, I tried very hard to show how education can really help him and that killing people is not a real solution to stop people from being killed. The best way for me to observe the impact I had on his vision of the situation was to hear the changes in his speech. As time went by, I heard him say, "I don't need war, I need education", "I will share my knowledge with the new generation and give them education, not guns", "A gun cannot fight war; education can." But, his favorite line was a quote from Malala Yousafzai, "A book and a pen can change the world." After hearing this emotionally charged story,



Htoo Kaw and Felix - Friends

I asked Htoo Kaw what helps him to stay happy after all this. He answered that it's to "play music and practice alone. Being alone is safe; people are dangerous. I need quiet. I don't need noise." His story is one of so many that I heard from the boys in the dormitory at Parami Learning Center.

Listen. In the darkness, they sing their own music. As I lie trying to sleep on a Friday night, in the boys' dormitory near midnight, I can hear a guitar string being plucked. Everybody knows the song. I hear a soft hum following the rhythmic lead of the strings. Then, a voice reaches my ears from out of the dark and cradles my soul in what would later be an acapella chorus. Seeing the moonlight piercing the bamboo roof, I think of the lost boys in Peter-Pan - living for the present. The difference is, these lost boys worry about their future. Their lives are songs with no comforting refrain.

The Power of Hmyaw Lin Gye - and of Perseverence

By Calila Tardif, 2016 Volunteer

Note: The story below provides a glimpse into the kinds of life experiences many of the people our volunteers have the opport unity to meet while in Mae Sot. These are the stories we carry with us on our return home. The name given this man, Hmyaw Lin Gye, is a pseudonym. It means Hope.

In early 2000 in Burma, it was impossible to walk on the streets and have private conversations, or even listen to international news. Cut off from the outside world, people were filled with uncertainty, doubt and mistrust. At this time, even if a student had the chance to get some education, it didn't make much difference to his or her life. There were no options, no opportunities for the poor and isolated people under the military regime.

Hmyaw Lin Gye was one of these students. A graduate in zoology, the shape his life would take was far from clear. Never had he imagined that he would live away from his young son

and family for 16 years, without a steady income or any assurance of what would happen the next day.



Hmyaw Lin Gye

Upon graduation this young man, full of potential, hit a wall. No jobs were to be found in his home country. His father was constantly putting pressure on him to get an income and start his life. Stuck, he decided to follow an altruistic woman, who helped him cross the border to Thailand illegally. She promised to get him a job, no matter the cost. Thai factories are synonymous with hard and cheap labour. Luckily, Hmyaw Lin Gye quickly got a promotion and through a series of events, got to meet a couple of foreigners interested in art. They needed someone to buy pieces of art to sell in a bigger

market. After leaving his information and his application with them, this committed young man had to move back to Burma. He had been detained as an illegal migrant by the

local authority who confiscated his paycheck. Luckily, he had a choice... to be detained *and* lose all of his money, or simply to lose his money right away and leave the country.

Having returned to Burma, Hmyaw Lin Gye was back to the original tension in the family, back to an almost doomed situation. After a month of daily fights with his father, he had a dream at night. He dreamt that he got the job that would change his life. So he followed his instinct and left on a quest to find fulfillment. What else was there to do? In such a controlled and conservative country, this was not easy. The military was everywhere, and governmental surveillance was everywhere.

Finally, he managed to return to Thailand where he was hired by the foreigners he had met previously to buy art for them, a job he did for 5 years. Eventually, he had an opportunity to take a completely new job developing a tea shop and the art gallery at a new Mae Sot shop, which supports artists and craftspeople in the migrant community.

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Currently, he is promoting the work of migrant workers at his own art studio. He also teaches art to young children at some migrant learning centres – which is where I first came to know him.

Hmyaw Lin Gye's life experience developed in him understanding and wisdom. These past 16 years have not been easy. Being away from where his heart belongs has proven to be difficult. But helping others to stay strong and pursue their education is the best achievement he could dream of. He still lives away from his village, but visiting yearly, as is now possible, and trying to provide support as much as he can, he hopes to see the people of Myanmar as well as his own family reunited once and for all.

My meeting with Hmyaw Lin Gye was revealing to me. The hard work he has done for so long in this state of uncertainty, always devoted to his people and always with a gentle and resolute spirit, represents for me a real accomplishment.

Ella and Peter Bulow (center) with school staff in front of the dorm they helped build

A letter from a volunteer's enthusiastic parent

Dear MSEP Donors and Supporters,

As a parent of a daughter who took part in the Mae Sot Education Project, I can attest that one of the most powerful forces in the world is the power of one. Once upon time there was a wealthy man on vacation walking along a beach. He sat under a palm tree and watched a little boy carry fish that had washed up on a shore and put them back in the water. He spent hours doing this



until finally the man said to the boy, "Hey kid, why are you bothering to do this?! There are hundreds of fish on the beach, you're never going to make a difference!" The boy didn't even look at the man and he kept on carrying the fish to the water. As he was walking by the man, he said, "It's going to make a difference for the ones I put back." The man could not argue with that answer so for the rest of the afternoon he helped the boy put the fish back in the water. It turned out to be the best day of his vacation and he felt he had made a difference. This story captures exactly what my daughter did, and what years of volunteers have done since 2004, teaching students in Mae Sot, Thailand with the Mae Sot Education Project.

When I was informed by my daughter, Elise, that she had applied to take part in the Mae Sot Education Project, naturally I asked, "Where?!". When she told me Mae Sot was somewhere near the Burmese border in northern Thailand, I thought, 'Oh great, the Golden Triangle!' As a political junkie and avid reader of National Geographic, I was concerned about the location and the safety of my little girl. My daughter was brought up surrounded by fiercely strong, talented women so it was really no surprise that she would take on this challenge. When I found out Ella had gained a spot on the team I was both nervous and very proud. At that moment, I decided I would make the trip over to Thailand to visit her during her six month stay. Now 'I' had become 'we', and fundraising was needed to make this happen.

I helped Ella organize a casino night in our community and although we were somewhat successful, my daughter lamented that it was a lot of work and effort for a small amount of money. I countered that, yes, more would have been better, but we created awareness for the project in an area (Dewittville, a farming community outside Ormstown, Quebec) where it was previously unknown. And indeed, after that casino night fundraiser, people would stop me on the street to make donations, knowing the money was going directly to people who needed it, going directly to Burmese migrant schools in Mae Sot through people they knew and trusted. If you ever wonder whether your donations matter to the MSEP, the answer is, 'Yes, it makes a huge difference!' Be the boy putting the fish back in the water...

So I flew to Bangkok, then took a seven hour bus ride to Mae Sot and met my daughter and the group who had settled into their teaching duties with the six partner schools. I was overwhelmed by so many things during my journey, including the heat and culture. The first day in Mae Sot, my daughter said, "I love this school, the food is so good here!" I immediately said, "No, we are not going to take their food." "Relax, Dad. This is how it works." The principal welcomed me and made me feel like my daughter and I were family. With the donations given to me for the MSEP, we were able to extend the office and build a dorm for young girls who had no safe space to sleep in, and this was built by the parents who were so grateful for the support.

My time at the school impacts me to this day. I would like to thank the MSEP Project Committee for their tireless efforts to help the migrant children who attend the schools in and around Mae Sot.

With lasting enthusiasm, **Peter Bulow**, Father of Ella Bulow, 2009 Volunteer

AN UNEXPECTED BENEFIT Mae Sot Education Project ex-volunteers become project organizers By Mary Purkey, MSEP Project Committee

Note: A shorter version of this article was published in the *Sherbrooke Record* in February.

Friends of our project know fairly well what we do in Thailand, both the assistance we give Burmese migrant learning centres and the rich intercultural and humanitarian experience we give to our

volunteers. It is often difficult to measure the longer-term impact of overseas experiences on volunteers, but for us on the MSEP Project Committee, one important measure of our success is the number of volunteers who have actually joined our Project Committee upon return to Canada and who in the process have continued to provide support for migrant and for schools newer generations of volunteers who are following in their footsteps. Let me tell you a bit about some of these "returned volunteers".



Emily, William, Barbara & Laurence

Barbara Rowell was part of our second team of volunteers in 2005. She was a graduate of Champlain who had gone on to do a degree in Engineering at Université de Sherbrooke. She spent six months at Pyi Chit and Parami migrant schools, but then returned to Mae Sot a year later for a full academic year (June to March) to volunteer at Minmahaw Foundation, a post-secondary program that prepares Burmese students to earn the American General Education Diploma. Barbara taught science to these students and discovered her passion for teaching. Her mother, Nancy Baldwin, visited her while she was there as well. Upon return to Lennoxville, she embarked on a career change, getting her master's degree in teaching and taking a position at Bishop's College School where she still teaches today. She also joined the MSEP Project Committee. In her "free time", she manages our monthly bank transfers to volunteers for allowances, rent and other needs. It is now almost 11 years since her first foray into the world of the Thai-Burmese border.

Of her involvement with MSEP, Barbara says, "For me, the biggest impact that the project has had has been on my career path. It was an amazing opportunity for me to find what I am truly passionate about. It also helped me to have a more international outlook in my work *and* to be more open, adaptable and self-

sufficient. Being on the committee helps me to give back to the project that brought me so much but it also helps ensure the sustainability of the support that we give the schools. The fact that we are so reliable and consistent in our work with the schools is one of the most valuable things about the project. We may not be big but we will be there!"

Emily Prangley Desormeaux first went to Mae Sot as an MSEP volunteer from Champlain in 2009 and returned to attend Bishop's University and also join

our Project Committee. While at Bishop's, she returned to Mae Sot twice, once to do research for MSEP and a second time to complete a research project as part of her International Studies degree.

After two years teaching English in China, Emily has now returned to the Eastern Townships. Along with working at Townshippers' Association, she has rejoined our Project Committee. As an inveterate local fundraiser, we have enlisted Emily to oversee a new fundraiser, a golf tournament which will be held on August 12th. In addition, because our funding from the Pathy Family Foundation will be coming to an end soon, we have given Emily a small grant to research new sources of core funding

for MSEP. We anticipate that she will be a long-stayer on our committee.

A third member of the committee who also plays an indispensable role in managing our project is former volunteer William Bryson. William volunteered in Mae Sot from June 2013 to March 2014. At that point, he was a recent Champlain grad. Since his return to follow Business at Bishop's University, he has learned to manage the project accounts and produce an annual financial statement. We now rely on him to perform these tasks.

Of his role on the committee, Will says, "I decided to join the PC because I wanted to continue to help Burmese children gain access to education on the border (Thai/Burmese) and help provide this life-changing volunteer experience to other students at Bishop's and Champlain. I also wanted to put the business skills I had learned in school to use, which is why I began helping with the project's finances. Volunteering with the PC gives me a deep sense of satisfaction in knowing that I am still helping improve the education of Burmese children. Selecting the new volunteers, preparing them for the endeavour, monitoring their progress and finding out how their life has changed as a result of their involvement in the project is truly rewarding. We take students who have potential to do great things, we give them the opportunity and tools to do so and what they accomplish is remarkable. I have also realized that it takes a lot of effort to send volunteers to teach in Mae Sot. It has given me a real appreciation for the work the committee members do each year. "

Volunteering in Mae Sot played an important role in Will's decision to combine Business with International Studies. It has also played an important part in his decision to return to Mae Sot this coming summer and fall to volunteer with the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners, a front-line human rights defender that documents situations of political prisoners in Myanmar. Fortunately, he will be able to continue his role as keeper of accounts while there. He will also act as a support for our new team of volunteers.

The newest ex-volunteer member of our Project Committee is 2015-2016 volunteer Laurence Michaud. Laurence completed Special Care Counselling at Champlain prior to going to Mae Sot and is now pursuing a degree in social work at Université de Sherbrooke. She has spent the last months learning how the committee functions and assisting in important decisions related to volunteers' preparation and community outreach. "When I came back from Mae Sot, more than a year ago now, I knew that I didn't want this experience to be over. Being part of the Project Committee is the continuation of my support for migrant education in Mae Sot. It also gives me the opportunity to share my experience with the new volunteers and help them in their preparation, just like returned volunteers did when I was about to leave for Thailand."

All of these young Project Committee members' commitment to MSEP is evident in their willingness to juggle the demands of

academia and/or work with the demands of the project which include attending monthly committee meetings, following project developments through email, assisting at fundraisers, selecting and providing support for new volunteers, and taking on larger management tasks that enable us to do what we do. Of course, not all returned volunteers are in a position to stay in the Eastern Townships. Those described above all originate in our community,

and their on-going involvement in the project contributes to its enrichment in important ways.

One local volunteer who has not stayed home but who continues to play an important role in the project's sustenance is Megan Irving. Megan first volunteered with MSEP in 2011-2012. She returned to Lennoxville to complete her BA at Bishop's and while here, sat on the project committee. She then returned to Mae Sot for a



Megan at Parami where she now lives

second volunteer stint in 2013. She has effectively not returned to Canada except to visit and now lives on the "campus" (such as it is) of Parami Learning Centre in Mae Sot where she teaches and is school director.

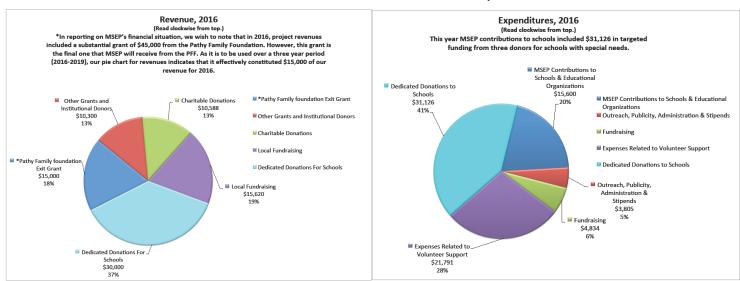
However, Megan also manages some of our project's logistical challenges, such as the maintenance of the house we rent during the time when volunteers are not living in it. In addition, she helps us to communicate with some of our partners regarding funding issues and was instrumental in producing a video that yielded new funding opportunities for one of them. Finally, simply by her warm and intelligent manner, she helps us maintain our project's very positive presence in the migrant education community in Mae Sot. Her commitment is linked to her conviction that, as she says, "while many organisations have turned from the border in recent years, MSEP's continued support and the volunteers invaluable contributions year after year, lend partner schools great hope and inspiration as we all continue to work for the future of our schools and our students."

Considering these vital contributions of ex-volunteers to our project, it becomes clear that what MSEP offers young Canadians extends beyond overseas experience. Along with helping to shape their futures, it also provides an avenue for some to learn skills related to project management and delivery. This last achievement has been an unexpected outcome that we hope will continue to bear fruit as MSEP continues to develop. More importantly, as these young leaders carry on with their lives and apply their new skills in other domains, our whole society will benefit.

Project Developments

Migrant learning centres in Mae Sot continue to face huge challenges. A number of Burmese education organizations are in discussion with both Thai and Myanmar governments about how to provide migrant school children with documents that would enable them to transfer into "official" school systems. This discussion will inevitably be long. However, fundamentally, even when migrant schools are unable to achieve the goal of accreditation, they provide important protection and basic literacy and thinking skills for children who would otherwise be in the labour market. Our commitment is to help them continue to do so. For most migrant schools, the bottom line is being able to pay rent for a safe space and salaries for teachers. Among our six partners, four have core funding from other organizations that pay rent and teachers' salaries. Two [one with 900 students and one with 220 students] have no core funding and piece together budgets from various unstable sources, including contributions from parents who live in poverty. For a vivid picture of what this means, see the video made last year to highlight the struggles of Hsa Mu Htaw Learning centre at this link: https://youtu.be/AGVAInE4t7k. In 2017, this school's struggle continues. It faces the probability of having to simply close its grade five program for lack of funds. If this happens, the children affected are unlikely to attend school at all.

MSEP project development in 2017 will involve looking for new, more sustainable sources of funding and helping our partners in Thailand continue to develop their capacity to offer students accredited education. With regard to funding, the golf tournament planned for August 12th is our effort to strike out in a new direction which we hope will interest our community. Even if you are not a golfer, you may find a way to contribute!



A Look at Our Finances in 2016, An Exceptional Year

In reporting on MSEP's financial situation in 2016, we wish to note that project revenues included a substantial grant of \$45,000 from the Pathy Family Foundation. However, this grant is the final one that MSEP will receive from the PFF. As it is to be used over a three year period (2016-2019); our pie chart for revenues indicates that it effectively constituted \$15,000 of our revenue for 2016. Funds raised by the project's activities, charitable donations and donations from community organizations as well as other grants made up the remainder of our revenue.

The expenditures chart here shows how we used our funds in 2016. \$15,600 was given to our six partner schools as MSEP's annual donation. In addition, some generous donations enabled us to make targeted contributions amounting to \$31,126 to two schools with urgent, special needs. The project continues to spend relatively little (11%) on itself, and most of this money goes into project development, outreach and fundraising. Careful decisions and frugality on the part of our four volunteers have also kept their expenses down. If you have any questions or would like further information about our project finances, please contact us. We are proud of our management and happy to respond.

Who we are and what we do

The *Mae Sot Education Project (MSEP*) is a community project based on the campus of Bishop's University and Champlain College – Lennoxville in Sherbrooke, Quebec. Since 2004, we have provided assistance to six schools for migrant and refugee youth from Burma/Myanmar whose access to education depends on support from the international community. In recent years we have also worked with other schools. Each year we select a group of young people from our campus to go to Mae Sot for six months. While there, they provide practical assistance to teachers and enrichment activities for children in the schools. They learn about the situation of displacement experienced by the Burmese people in Thailand as well as about the challenges for the Thai community in coping with a large population of refugees and migrants. Finally, they share their experience with Canadians. Over the last 13 years, MSEP has delivered over \$126,000 in funding assistance (excluding two substantial grants given through specific donations) and as of June 2017, will have sent 56 volunteers to assist the migrant education community in Mae Sot.

The Project Committee is made up of members of the community, faculty from Bishop's and Champlain, and former youth volunteers with the project. Currently, members are: William Bryson (2013 volunteer), Catherine Isely, Judy Keenan, Laurence Michaud (2015 volunteer), Mary Purkey, and Garry Retzleff, and Barbara Rowell (2005 volunteer). *Contributions to the project are always welcome and tax receipts are issued.* To make a donation electronically, here are the links: <u>http://www.ubishops.ca/gift</u> or <u>http://www.crc-lennox.qc.ca/community/foundation</u>. Remember to indicate that your donation is for the Mae Sot Education Project. <u>Or</u>, donate by cheque at our project address: Box 67, Champlain College – Lennoxville, Sherbrooke, QC J1M 2A1. Be sure to include the name of the Foundation <u>and</u> MSEP on your cheque.

Donors and Supporters 2016

We wish to thank *everyone* who has helped to make our project a success. Donations take many forms. Financial donations, donations of time and energy, raffle prizes, in-kind donations of all sorts are all deeply appreciated. In addition to those people and organizations noted below are many others who have faithfully supported our fundraisers. **Thank you all!**

We wish to thank these

organizations & businesses The Pathy Family Foundation St Mark's Chapel SECCL (Champlain **Teachers Union**) **Oak Foundation Oasis Christian Centre** Champlain Student Association Champlain College -Lennoxville **Bishop's University University Singers** Auberge le Coeur d'Or Boutique Passerose Clarke & fils Ltee. Familiprix (Lennoxville) Follett's Bookstore Golden Lion Pub Le Chou de Bruxelles **Racine Santé Restaurant Dagon Restaurant Le Cartier Restaurant Shalimar** Saveurs & Gormandises Visite sous Terre Capelton Mines

and these individuals Avril Aitken Barbara & Steve Allatt Janet Angrave, **Eunice Baldwin** Margaret Beattie & Wolf Rasmussen **Claude Beauchemin** Carinne Bevan Henry Boer Sheila Bowen **Daniel & Delores Breton** James & Helena Brodie Tom & Rosemary Cavanagh Zoe Constantinides **Robert & Christine** Cooper Vincent Cuddihy Gerald Cutting Melanie Cutting Anick Delorme Lucinda Doheny Tim Doherty & Dinah Duffield David Dutton Lewis & Cathy Evans

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