Impact

MADE by McGill

The McGill Fund Annual Giving Report 2020

Faculty of Engineering
Message from the Faculty Advancement Board

2021 will be a special year: McGill’s 200th Year Anniversary. The Bicentennial Celebration is marked by the $2 Billion “Made by McGill Campaign,” preparing the University for its Third Century. Education is changing rapidly: the global COVID-19 pandemic has thrust us into new ways of teaching, researching, and communicating. As we adjust and plan for the future, our support as alumni is more critical than ever. It allows McGill to train a new generation of leaders and problem-solvers for a rapidly changing and often unpredictable world.

Spring of 2020 has been a uniquely challenging time for us all: the pandemic upended our lives in different ways, and students especially were faced with unprecedented challenges. Seeing our community rally together has been a lifeline and truly heartwarming. We are so proud to be part of this strong community of Engineering, Architecture, and Urban Planning alumni.

The crisis showed us first-hand the need for discretionary funds, such as those raised by the McGill Fund (previously known as the Annual Fund), available to be used in unforeseen situations. This report gives you an idea of some of the great things we can accomplish, showing the impact of a community coming together to enhance the education of the next generation. Engineers in Action is an example of the kind of outside-the-classroom learning experience which allows current students—future alumni, to grasp the ethical and civic worth of their work.

We wish you and your families a safe Fall season, and would like to see you at McGill’s Bicentennial Celebrations in 2021, in-person or online as the situation permits. Feel free to contact any of us at any time. Thank you again so much for all your generosity as we take this big step into McGill’s next chapter!
As a newly-minted member of the McGill Faculty of Engineering alumni, former EUS President Nilou Seraj (BEng’20) plans to keep close ties with future students.

In her term as President of the Engineering Undergraduate Society (EUS), Nilou Seraj had what you might call a fairly atypical time in early March due to the global pandemic, the council had only days to transfer all of their activities remotely.

“There were so many challenges I did not know I was going to have to face in my term as president. Exhibit A: COVID-19,” says Seraj on the phone. “Lost fundraising events, cancelled programs, administrating without an office—it had a huge impact on the EUS and extracurricular activities in general. But if there was a problem, my role as president was to find a solution. Engineering students are good at adapting to new challenges and new environments—and we did it, we adapted. We even created an online banquet to celebrate the amazing EUS volunteers, with around 100 people attending.”

There is one challenge overcome in particular that Seraj is very proud to talk about: the links she established between the engineering student body and the alumni through a brand-new student-to-alumni newsletter called Homing Pigeon. It is a fitting achievement of this passionate, dedicated, trilingual bioengineering student and her deep involvement in university life.

Born in France, and raised in Iran, Niloufar “Nilou” Seraj moved to Canada with her family in 2010. With the dream of advancing children’s health through biotech innovations, Seraj had the honour of being a part of the very first cohort of students in the Department of Bioengineering Undergraduate Program when she entered McGill in the Fall of 2016. In her first year of studies she helped to build, from scratch, the Bioengineering Undergraduate Students Society (BUSS), becoming its President in her second year. She went on to be elected as EUS’s Vice-President Academic, and then President in her final year of studies in 2019-2020.

One of Seraj’s most memorable moments as a student is having the privilege of meeting engineering alumna Marika Roy (BEng’61), who provided the initial funding to create the Marika Zelenka Roy Chair in Bioengineering, the endowed chair currently held by Professor Dan Nicolau.

“It was surreal to hear how Marika and Dan worked together to create a program,” says Seraj. “It was really wonderful to meet them and thank them personally.” Seraj’s sensitivity to the importance of philanthropy is apparent. Sitting on EUS’s Executive Committee for three years, she became acutely aware of how funding impacts the quality of student life.

“I got to know a lot of EUS initiatives and groups that apply to the Student Initiative Fund (SIF): design teams, industry events, Frosh week. Our executive had a plan to advertise this fund more and get more alumni working towards this cause, reaching out to the alumni through the EUS.”

During conference tours with the Canadian Federation of Engineering Students (Seraj currently serves as Quebec’s Ambassador), Seraj discovered that other Engineering programs around Canada cultivate meaningful relationships with their alumni through dedicated outreach activities, including newsletters to former students.

Seraj saw this as a relationship from which students, faculty and alumni could all benefit.

“Part of my election platform was a commitment to create a stronger relationship between the alumni and the EUS,” says Seraj, who has launched her professional career as a Project Manager for Bell Communications. After she was elected, a brainstorming session led to the decision that EUS would send out a newsletter each semester to highlight the students’ achievements. Once the idea was approved, they had only three weeks to put everything together and send it out. The first edition of the Homing Pigeon got a strong response, bringing in reflections from alumni as far back as the 1970s. The EUS produced their second issue in the spring of 2020. Seraj is looking forward to receiving it this Fall as a new alumna. It seems that she will never be far from her alma mater.

“I couldn’t have finished my degree without the network of support I had from other students, staff and professors,” Seraj concludes. “Their support helped me to grow and to graduate. I know I want to stay in contact with them as an alumna.”

As President of the Engineering Undergraduate Society (EUS), Nilou Seraj (BEng’20), photographed here in the Redpath museum in April 2018, has strengthened bonds and enhanced communication between alumni and students.

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What if you could take your classroom expertise and while still at school, work together with a community to help provide it with much-needed infrastructure? That’s exactly what Engineers in Action has been doing—building bridges of the physical and cultural kind.

The eSwatini family that hosted Leïlah Sory (BEng'21) in 2019 gave her a nickname: Siyabonga. It seemed appropriate, since it’s a word in the local language used to thank a group of people. That gratitude, felt by both the community and the student volunteers working on a bridge-building project in the African country formerly known as Swaziland, was all around for Leïlah/Siyabonga to witness.

She marveled over the large and diverse community participation. “We had women, we had men, we had younger people, older people; everyone helped out and was volunteering.”

Leïlah, going into her fourth-year as a Civil Engineering student, spent two weeks with Engineers in Action (EIA) helping to build a foot bridge over a dangerously impassable crossing, and sadly they both perished. In fact, the first project the organization completed back in the early 2000s was one that replaced a rope that had been fixed between two pieces of an old broken bridge and was stretched over a raging river. Those who crossed had to hang precariously, shimmying along the rope.

Ye feels for the children. “They risk their lives just to go to school.”

Leïlah and Ye say each local chapter has to prepare for months before the project begins, raising money, following the courses EIA provides including cross-cultural training. While the organization scouts for locations and does the initial research, the student group performs a concept review, a design, and a construction and safety report. Once the team is on site, materials are resourced locally and the construction crew defers to a “bridge court,” made up of professional engineers for supervision to ensure that the design was sound, the quality was good and that the construction was safe,” says Leïlah.

The days spent building the bridge, with its tons of stone, wood and concrete, and lengths of cable, erased the 2020 trip where Leilah would become project manager, but had to postpone it to next summer due to the pandemic. Ye recalls a story she heard that happened at the site two months before Leilah arrived. A man tried to rescue his grandchild over a makeshift river crossing, and sadly they both perished. In fact, the first project the organization completed back in the early 2000s was one that replaced a rope that had been fixed between two pieces of an old broken bridge and was stretched over a raging river. Those who crossed had to hang precariously, shimmying along the rope.

Leïlah was billeted with a local family. She would learn to cook a polenta dish known as pap, wash her clothes by the river and attend church with the rest of the community. The trip was made possible thanks to donations from Quebec’s Ministry of Transport, engineering firms including Montreal-based Hatch Ltd., and the many donors to the university’s Seeds of Change fundraising platform and McGill24: A Day of Giving. For Leilah, donor involvement was vital. “We wouldn’t be able to do our projects without them. It’s amazing to have their support.”

There is now a new bridge in that village: two students played a role in it becoming a reality. Leilah welcomes the chance to apply knowledge learned at school directly onto a real project: “That’s what Engineers in Action is doing. We’re applying our knowledge. And helping communities.”

A National Geographic photo of men pulling each other across a broken bridge by rope, over the Blue Nile River in Ethiopia, inspired Kenneth Frantz to start the organization Bridges to Prosperity in 2001, of which Engineers in Action is the university program. EIA group photo: Leilah Sory (BEng'21), center far left. © Courtesy of Engineers in Action.
When Talib Mahmood Sheikh established a scholarship to help international students at the McGill Faculty of Engineering, he was continuing a long family commitment to the value of philanthropy.

Talib Mahmood Sheikh (BEng’14) has always liked to give to a good cause. Up until the age of 18, he spent more than 10 hours each week teaching English to kids at SOS Children’s Village, a non-profit housing project for orphans in his hometown of Lahore, Pakistan. Perhaps it wasn’t a great leap for Talib to continue that philanthropy with the McGill Faculty of Engineering’s Talib Mahmood Sheikh Scholarship, established in 2018. It’s a reflection of a commitment to giving that has been the status quo in his extended family for generations.

Talib’s family has long worked with children with disabilities, healthcare for the underprivileged, and women’s empowerment and education. Both his maternal and paternal grandparents had social NGOs in Pakistan, and his mother and father run two NGOs: the National Society for Mentally and Emotionally Handicapped Children, and the Women’s Social Service Organisation.

“My parents were my role models for me growing up,” says Talib, on the phone from Los Angeles. “For example, if you empower women you empower a generation. If you have an educated mother, she will pass it on to the kids—and the tree becomes a forest.”

When asked about the motivations for giving to his alma mater, Talib is very clear: “I have to give credit where it’s due. My career has been an exciting journey and McGill has played an integral role in that.”

Graduating from the Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering in 2014, Talib had already made a career shift while at the Faculty, thanks to an eight-month work-term as an electrical engineer on a hydroelectric project in Kapuskasing, Ontario. It was a watershed moment for Talib. “In construction you can see an idea transition into reality. When I came back, I was convinced that I needed to chase that career. This is why I think internships are the power of the Faculty of Engineering at McGill.”

After graduation, Talib did a stint in oil and gas at Fort McMurray, Alberta, eventually landing his current employment as a commissioning manager with PCL, the construction juggernaut with offices in Australia, North American and the Caribbean. He has crisscrossed the United States ever since—from Alberta to Maryland to New York, and now California, where he is working on LAX-CONRAC, the consolidated rent-a-car facility at part of the Los Angeles International Airport. Along the way, PCL supported Talib’s Master’s in Construction Management from Columbia University, which he completed in the spring of 2020.

“Having the McGill brand name allowed me to break into the construction industry. I would say to young engineering students that if you want something, and you are willing to work for it, chances are you will get it. It might not be overnight, but you will get it.”

Along with the internships, Talib is also grateful for the chance he was given as a young student to work on campus, for the University Advancement Office and Procurement Services. It helped him gain valuable local employment experience, and stabilize the at-times rocky financial life of an international student.

“I was lucky that my parents were very supportive of me, but the economy in Pakistan is very fragile. While I was studying at McGill, costs doubled due to the poor exchange rate between the rupee and the Canadian dollar.”

Talib’s family also faced a greater financial crunch when the floods hit Pakistan in 2010 and 2011. The floods destroyed 55% of homes in Pakistan, displaced 87% of the population, and forced 46.9% to live in emergency camps. McGill University was one of the first to respond to the crisis, a gesture of solidarity that Talib has never forgotten:

“McGill stepped up and supported the Pakistani student community on campus in a time of need. It was a great gesture indeed!”

Generations of Giving
Emeritus Professor and former Dean of the Faculty of Engineering John Gruzleski has the ability to turn a conversation into something much larger. During his 36 years at McGill, he could accomplish wonders.

The former Dean of Engineering and his wife Olga had the opportunity for a conversation about John's life and career. John is remembered warmly, as a professor and dean who always went the extra mile. The weekly chats he and his graduate students would have every Friday afternoon had an ulterior motive. He knew that talking about one's research and seeing a colleague's progress would help his students to complete their work. “If there are one or two who are lagging behind, when they see other people making great progress, they generally, pretty quickly, start to move.”

The power of a caring conversation is something John can trace back to his childhood, to a French teacher who wanted her students to succeed. She would hold regular conversation clubs with John and other classmates, sweetening the deal with milk and cookies. “She was completely devoted to her students,” he recalls of Miss Russell. This gave him the opportunity years later to work with French-speaking academic and industrial partners in Montreal.

John was hired by McGill as a professor of metallurgy in 1969, and his work with metals came naturally. He was born in the mining town of Sudbury, in Northern Ontario, surrounded by “rock miners and the smell of sulfur dioxide.” His love for science was encouraged by his father, a high school chemistry teacher, who also taught botany and zoology. “We used to walk down to the high school on Sunday mornings and I would help him to set up his experiments in the lab.” His father outfitted him with a basement chemistry lab, allowing his son to experiment with rocket ships, which would burn up before their launches. “I remember him cautioning me that I should perhaps learn a bit more about combustion.”

John’s interest in engineering led him to an undergraduate degree at Queen’s University, and a Master’s and PhD at the University of Toronto, where he met Olga, then a secretary in the Department of Metallurgy. “I should be thanking the University of Toronto. They gave me a Master’s, a PhD and a wife.” He moved to Germany for a post-doctoral fellowship, picking up German, and a Volkswagen Beetle from the manufacturer, which made travel convenient. He spent a year at the German Atomic Agency, looking at carbon monoxide’s role in solidifying steel. “It was quite common for professors to spend half their time in industry and half their time at the university.”

“A much more recent conversation resulted in John and Olga naming McGill in their will, as a reciprocal gesture for the University having given John “years of academic fulfillment.”

The bequest has no strings attached and is the kind of funding Gruzleski drew on while he was Dean. “Education is much more than just the classroom and the laboratory. Really great universities allow students to do things that broaden their studies. You’ve got to be able to provide students with those extra things.”

Olga and John Gruzleski are doing just that, leaving plenty more to talk about.

Legacy gifts are an important part of McGill’s future. You can perpetuate your current support of the McGill Fund through a bequest that benefits the Dean’s Legacy Endowment Fund. For example, a bequest of 25K will ensure a perpetual annual gift of 1000 CAD in aid of emerging priorities. Contact ua.engineering@mcgill.ca for more information.

“The Power of Conversation”

Education is much more than just the classroom and the laboratory. Really great universities allow students to do things that broaden their studies.”

—JOHN GRUZLESKI

When he returned to Canada, he saw opportunities to bridge the classic divide between basic research and applied engineering. An important conversation in his career happened (in French) on the commuter train with a former graduate student who was working as a chemical engineer. That conversation led to a technique that provided strengthened recycled aluminum for lightweight engine parts, and much commercial success.

As Dean, many other conversations also bore fruit. His meetings with engineering alumnus Lorne Trottier (BEng’70, MEng’73), led to a $10-million donation. The Lorne M. Trottier Building gave the Faculty more teaching laboratories, interactive learning rooms and meeting spaces, and helped increase enrollments.

In 2005, John’s retirement was in name only. Just one year later, he agreed to help the University of Guelph reshape their School of Engineering as its Director. Three years later, when John left, it was three times the size. In 2010, he began an antiques business in Guelph that continues to this day.

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It was their older sister Mary who made the big move to Montreal, paving the way for her brothers. For a time all four were on campus at McGill, and there were years with at least one sibling around to enjoy university life with. The brothers recall that thrill of being away from home and the opportunities awaiting them, with that wistfulness in the air every fall. "It takes a long time to get over that feeling when you stop going to school," says John. "It was my freshman year and I remember walking back to the dorm room," adds David. "It was a fall night, the sun was setting and I was walking up the hill with my books, and I said, 'This is the coolest thing I've ever done.'"

John and David’s recollections also have them thinking back to tough teachers and late-night cramming. David remembers how McGill’s Electrical Engineering program would trim by a third each year their lowest performing students, and can see in his mind a professor handing back assignments and letting the class know that the average mark had been 35. Those difficulties seem to only strengthen his appreciation. "The seven years I spent at McGill for my two degrees provided an incredible opportunity and environment to learn, especially in a culturally rich environment like Montreal." He believes that alumni have the responsibility to support the University and to help it further its mission of enriching the lives of future students. This is what inspires them to give back to McGill.

"I donate to help provide others the opportunities that I had," said John, who as an award-winning undergraduate, got to work in a couple of his professors’ research labs. He recalls cramming all night on the top floor of the Macdonald Engineering Building, though he preferred the late-night solitude of Gardner Hall. The brothers laugh as they remember Gardner Hall’s requirement of a “dinner jacket” for dining, and how some fellow students would take advantage of the fact that the rule only mentioned the jacket—and wear their everyday casual clothes underneath.

All four siblings became successful in their fields. David has been a cybersecurity expert and entrepreneur, having co-founded Imprivata, the company behind the sign-on platform OneSign, used extensively in hospitals. John has been on faculty at University of Massachusetts Lowell for 30 years, having held positions as Dean of Engineering and Vice Provost for Enrollment. Mary went on to Harvard and became an architect, and Peter a doctor. David says support from key professors at McGill gave him that important impetus. "It allowed me to build the skills and confidence to start my career in R&D. Something that wouldn’t have been possible otherwise." The brothers look to how the Faculty can provide future students with the unique experience they enjoyed. David would like to see more entrepreneurial courses to reflect the numbers of young people wanting to bring new ideas to the market. John says that donors can make a real difference by supporting first-year scholarships, and that undergraduate research grants are a great recruiting tool for freshman admissions: "It's a difference maker."

A fondness for their alma mater translated into John’s class recently raising $500,000 to mark 45 years since their graduation. With their 50th anniversary coming up in 2023, David’s class will have their work cut out trying to match that kind of gratitude.
Thank you

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2,241 alumni and friends contributed to the McGill Fund in 2019-20. While we would like to be able to publish all of their names, we only have space to list Leadership gifts on this page (those who contributed $1,000 or more). The list is not comprehensive; many individuals wished to remain anonymous.

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You’ve cultivated the habit of being grateful for every good thing that comes to you, and to give thanks continuously. And because all things have contributed to your advancement, you should include all things in your gratitude.”

—RALPH WALDO EMERSON