

**McGill Community for Lifelong Learning  
President's Report by Christopher Neal  
Annual General Meeting  
Friday, March 28, 2025**

**MCLL Presidency: a challenge, an honour, a rewarding experience**

As my tenure as president of MCLL nears its end, I would like to thank all of those who helped me tackle this challenge. First among these is Nadine Ozkan, our vice president, who has consistently provided valuable counsel and support on many issues, while also piloting various initiatives herself. She will be an excellent MCLL president. Thanks also to past presidents Robert Winters, Jeff Sidel and Rick Jones, who have been unfailingly helpful; Rick and Jeff have continued to serve on executive committee, along with Christine Mutter, whom I thank for her careful minute-taking at executive and council meetings, and as volunteer coordinator. From the School of Continuing Studies, I am grateful to Dean Carola Weil for her enthusiastic backing of MCLL, as well as Mandana Bassiri, Finance Director; Dina Guralnick, Communications Director; and Iren Urazbaeva, our Human Resources Officer, and staff in their units, for their support. In our office, thanks to Oleksii Zahreba, Sally Cooper, and Zoe Chiu.

**Net 30 Plus Task Force**

The “Net-30-Plus Task Force”, an initiative launched by our Treasurer, Jeff Sidel, in January 2024, has been a critical driver of our increased membership numbers achieved during this past fiscal year. Our Spring 2024 membership rose to 307 from 278 in Spring 2023, almost reaching the “net 30 new members” target in one semester. We dipped slightly in the Fall and Winter semesters, but managed to preserve a net gain of 24 members, from 1,013 in 2023-24, to 1,037 in 2024-25.

The idea behind this task force is that it brings together key volunteers from MCLL’s curriculum, communications, community outreach and special events committees to create a powerful synergy:

1. Persuade proven moderators and lecturers to make new proposals, thereby ensuring an offering of study groups and lectures that is high-quality, abundant and diverse;
2. Focused and tireless promotion on social media (primarily Facebook) and via traditional media pitching, as well as outreach to community groups;
3. Deliver an enjoyable and informative *Open House* event that is the focus for this effort.

All of these were achieved three times, with *Open Houses* in March and November of 2024, and just this past week, March 25, 2025, to which 87 new people were attracted, a record. Results like this are no accident; they are produced by an intelligent, focused team effort.

The Task Force has been diligent in learning from its work. Having the focus of an *Open House* to promote has proven a strong selling point. The Communications Committee has capitalized on this with a boosted Facebook effort, along with media pitching, getting MCLL on radio, TV and in print media. This raises our profile, generates buzz and pride in MCLL, and gives our

members tools to explain to their friends, thereby reinforcing the word-of-mouth promotion on which we continue to rely heavily. Thanks to Jeff Sidel, Linda Sidel, Nadine Ozkan, Yvon Bérubé, Sharon Bishin, Patty Hinojosa, Kathy Lauer, Marie Gravelle, Cynthia Bowllan, Peggy Leech, Christine Mutter, Howard King, Margit Zylberberg, Denise Lord, Robert Winters, Lorne Huston, Claire Booth, Jacques Lalanne, Belinda Beaton, Tony Frayne, Jean-Denis Gingras, Ginette Bazergui, Rick Jones, Tim Skene, Brian Webber, Charlotte French, Michael Moore, Juliet and Tony Wait, April Colosimo, Sally Cooper, Oleksii Zahreba and, before him, Zoe Chiu, for bringing this effort to fruition.

It has been a pleasure to work with this group of high-energy volunteers, whose impressive results prompted Council to approve a proposal to establish the Net-30-Plus Task Force as a permanent feature of MCLL's governance, to be chaired from now on by the Past President.

### **Public events**

Robert Winters, another past MCLL president who has remained active in MCLL's leadership, organized a highly successful public event September 17, 2024, *Getting Smart in Old Age*. This panel discussion featured the participation of François Vellas, president of the International Association of Universities of the Third Age (IAUTA), who was visiting Montreal. This was followed by MCLL's decision to rejoin the IAUTA, which has prompted IAUTA to invite MCLL's Bob Winters to join its board.

The in-person event attracted over a hundred attendees, who listened and posed questions to speakers Dean Carola Weil of McGill's School of Continuing Studies; Dr. Serge Gauthier, McGill professor and expert on dementia and Alzheimer's Disease; Lyne Landry, founding partner at AgeTech Capital which invests in ventures to serve older people; and Ruth Pelletier, founder of Seniors' Action Quebec. Events like this use MCLL's convening power to offer useful information to Montreal-area seniors, while also raising MCLL's public profile, ultimately attracting new members.

### **Members' Forum**

A hybrid Members' Forum was held October 18, 2024, at the McGill Faculty Club, with 64 participants, nine of whom were online. The Forum theme was ***Honouring the Past, Looking towards the Future***, and its purpose was to mobilize volunteers to strengthen our community by continuously improving the program, while also promoting it aggressively to attract new members.

After opening remarks from Dean Carola Weil of McGill's School of Continuing Studies, we had an excellent panel to kick off a lively discussion in which participants were invited to share their MCLL "origin stories" to tap into the elements of MCLL that have the strongest appeal. Catherine Main-Oster, a long-time MCLL member, presented a historical narrative based on her archival research on MCLL's evolution over 35 years. Robert Paris, a pioneer in applying neuroscience principles to management and leadership, gave a presentation on how neuroplasticity can change how we think and allow us to feel secure in telling real stories. When my turn came, I outlined key points of a recent members' survey, showing that MCLL has room

for growth in attracting more men, more people under 70, more diverse ethnic, racial and language communities, and more people whose academic background may not include a university degree. We concluded that we can build MCLL's membership by spreading the news of MCLL's program to those who've never heard of it, in our own lives. This would include a ramped-up effort to promote MCLL in public conversations about seniors, education, and learning, to raise our profile, and increase our membership.

An Open Mic session followed, in which all the participants engaged in discussion producing ideas and commitments which they posted on flipcharts, all of which were captured in a Members' Forum report prepared by Christine Mutter and Ginette Bazergui, chair of the Planning and Membership Committee. The commitments to volunteer for specific tasks, from moderating new study groups to helping with communications, were especially valuable, helping to bolster the ranks of our committees. Thanks to Ginette Bazergui, Marjorie Northrup, Linda Sidel, and Denise Lord of the Planning and Membership Committee for organizing the Forum, as well as Tim Skene, Zoe Chiu and Sally Cooper who provided vital support.

### **Fundraising: Zeller Family Foundation & McGill24 in 2025**

First, Tony Wait and the Development Committee he leads submitted a grant request to the Zeller Family Foundation seeking support to engage a social media specialist to up our game in online promotion of MCLL, which elicited a \$15,000 grant. The Communications Committee is now developing a plan to put these funds to work.

Second, March 12, 2025 was McGill24 day, and MCLL was there! MCLL's Development Committee members Tony Wait, Robert Winters, Irwin Block and yours truly worked the phones and the bake sale table, helping to prompt over 160 donations, totaling \$14,250, matching the excellent result achieved last year. Thanks also to Christine Mutter, Linda and Jeff Sidel, and Nadine Ozkan, who volunteered to buttonhole potential donors at the bake sale table erected by SCS staff in the 680 Sherbrooke lobby. Dean Carola Weil was there with us, and her team, including Dina Guralnik and Sirusho Papikian, who helped make our overall SCS-wide fundraising effort a success. We'll use the funds raised, among others, to organize more public events. These will focus—like *Getting Smart in Old Age*—on issue of ageing, such as physical and mental health, preventing and forestalling cognitive decline, promoting social interaction and community, strengthening online skills, and so on. The funds raised will also be utilized to revive a pre-pandemic MCLL program that offered sample lectures at seniors' residences in the Montreal area. Finally, they will be used to present our recorded lectures more effectively on our MCLL website.

These fundraised monies earmarked for outreach and communications-related activities will take pressure off our operational budget to finance these important initiatives that serve our long-term strategic goals of raising awareness of our programs to boost our membership.

### **Transitions**

During this fiscal year, we experienced turnover among our office staff, with our Program Administrator Zoe Chiu, leaving in January 2025 to take on an assignment in the School of

Continuing Studies. To fill that position, we recruited Oleksii Zahreba, who recently completed his Masters in public affairs at UdeM, and is past president and secretary-general of the International Association for Political Science Students, and administrative assistant for the International Political Science Association.

Our longtime Administrative Coordinator, Sally Cooper, has announced that she will retire in June 2025; we thank her for her devoted service to MCLL, especially in curating our vital curriculum offerings with the professional rigour this task demands. With her imminent departure, recruiting a capable replacement is a priority.

### **Social events**

We take our hats off to Linda Sidel and the Special Events Committee she leads for organizing the major events on the MCLL social calendar, namely the annual Volunteer Appreciation Dinner, held at the McGill Faculty Club June 19, 2024, a *See-You-in-September* luncheon, and a December 4 Holiday Party, held in our classrooms, which the team cleverly transformed into festive settings. Gatherings were held that same week of the Francophone Partenariat with *Projet Changement*, organized by Lorne Huston, Danielle Duhamel and Claire Booth. All were excellent examples of conviviality, and well-organized evidence that MCLL is a thriving community.

### **Budgetary adjustments**

Jeff Sidel's diligent stewardship of MCLL's finances—which will continue for another year—deserves mention. Jeff was not only the progenitor of the Net-30-Plus effort, whose results have helped us financially, but he also proposed and managed a restructuring of our endowment funds, transferring about half the monies from the special purposes fund to another fund that, unlike the special purposes fund, delivers a return on investment. This adjustment adds to MCLL's revenue stream while also keeping enough liquid funds aside to finance special projects.

### **Communications initiatives**

The website looks better. We're getting more earned media coverage than ever. We've got an agreement with the Fédération de l'âge d'or du Québec (FADOQ) to publicize our program with their members. Work is proceeding on search-engine-optimization. All this and more has been achieved by MCLL's Communications Committee, ably led by Yvon Bérubé, with superb support from others such as Sharon Bishin, Sue Purcell, Patricia Hinajosa, Nadine Ozkan, and Manon Lamontagne. Building on our Service Level Agreement with the SCS Communications Unit led by Dina Guralnik, our Communications Committee, under Yvon's leadership, has created an exceptionally strong collaboration.

### **“Minding the store”**

In addition to the special projects outlined above, many routine activities demand skill and discipline to get done, such as posting of study groups and lectures, participant registration, maintenance and fixes to our audio-visual equipment, recruitment and training of hosts and moderators, responding to questions from walk-in visitors and people calling on the phone,

among others. For this, we have relied on the staff work of Sally Cooper and Oleksii Zahreba, as well as Zoe Chiu before him, and volunteers, namely Tim Skene on IT issues, Susan Van Gelder on hosts' coordination, Christine Mutter as volunteer coordinator—and secretary—as well as office volunteers Sandra Baines, Carolyn Cunnison, Helen Forsyth, Laura Grunberg, Astri Thorvik, Anne Tittler, and Carol Wares.

### **Curriculum Improvements**

Our study groups offered for Spring 2025 are not only numerous at 46, but also diverse, including many topics—and moderators—that are completely new. This reflects the work of the Curriculum Committee led by Ana Maria Klein, who will be succeeded by Michael Moore, as well as the Net-30-Plus volunteers who helped by reaching out to previous moderators to encourage them to submit proposals.

### **Community Outreach**

The *Partenariat francophone*, in which francophone volunteers at MCLL are paired with McGill students seeking to improve their French, has continued under the leadership of Danielle Duhamel and Lorne Huston. Our partnership with *Projet changement* in Plateau-Mont-Royal also continues.

The Community Outreach committee, whose chair, Sandra Baines we thank for her service in this role—and as a previous MCLL president—also led the committee's interaction with the *One Voice* coalition, an effort to bring together organizations that serve Quebec's English-speaking seniors' community. This work will be continued under Theresa Rowat's leadership of the Community Outreach Committee.

### **A New Council**

Finally, thanks to Rick Jones and members of the Nominating Committee, namely Astri Thorvik, Christine Mutter, Sally Cooper and Zoe Chiu, whose report proposed several new council members who bring impressive credentials and experience, along with their volunteer spirit of engagement. Best wishes for success to Nadine Ozkan, incoming president, Michel Lamarche, incoming vice president, as well as incoming committee chairs Michael Moore (Curriculum), Theresa Rowat (Community Outreach), and Bruce McLeod (Planning and Membership). We are also grateful to incumbent committee chairs Yvon Bérubé (Communications), Linda Sidel (Special Events), and Tim Skene (IT), as well as Treasurer Jeff Sidel, and Secretary and Volunteer Coordinator Christine Mutter.

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