

Ep 32 - Giving our best: Generosity, specificity and riding the roller coaster with the Material Resources team

VO: Hello everyone, welcome to Undercurrents, I'm your host Ken Ogasawara. In today's episode we're talking relief kits, meat canning and amusement parks with the Material Resources team. Material Resources is a very dry name for a very exciting and fun program. We also find out that it's very, very specific. We'll hear from Jon Lebold, Alecia Weber and Dylan Yantzi in just a moment.

VO: Undercurrent is made possible with sponsorship from Kindred Credit Union. So I'm part of a neighbourhood chat group and last week someone messaged saying they were unhappy with a certain company their bank was invested in. This person asked the group chat for any alternative recommendations? Obviously I jumped in and said my piece for Kindred, saying they have been in the ethical investing game way before it was cool - and of course gave full disclosure that Kindred is a sponsor of the Undercurrents podcast I produce, thereby being both transparent and promotional at the same time. But then another neighbour chimed in and had this to say about Kindred:

VO: "I bank with kindred and I love it. I love that when I call, I get a live person within one menu selection, and have always had a great experience at the branches. At other banks I felt like they were always trying to sell me something, a line of credit, another mortgage, etc. but my experience at kindred feels more like they are trying to be genuinely helpful." End quote. Kindred is all about helping you Make Peace with your Money through real, human advice and by using money as a force for good in your community. Join me and my neighbours and go to kindredcu.com to open an account today!

[sound of phone ringing]

Bob: Hey mom, how are you?

Elaine (Grandma): Good. Jon is here, Beth is here...[fade down]

VO: The year is 2020. I'm in a small room at the MCC Ontario office in Kitchener huddled over the phone with Jon Lebold, Material Resources Coordinator for MCCO, his Dad, Bob, and his sister Beth Hovius, who also works for MCCO in donor relations. I recorded this conversation for a different story back then but dug it up again for this episode.

Elaine (Grandma): [fade in]... Hi grandma, I'm Ken, I don't know if we've met before...no we haven't [fade down].

VO: Fun fact: Bob was actually the Material Resources coordinator in Ontario years before Jon moved into the role, it was seeing his dad do this work and love it that inspired Jon to think maybe one day he could do it. In fact, Jon didn't tell his dad that he'd applied for the role until he was officially offered the job. But Bob had his own surprise for Jon. "You know what's

funny?" Father said to son, "You and I aren't the only ones in the family to hold this job." "Really?" said Jon. "Who was the first??"

Elaine (Grandma): I started in 1968 and I worked there for 13 years. I was a material aid supervisor.

VO: That's right. Elaine Lebold, otherwise known as Grandma.

VO: Despite a multi-generational calling to the work of material resources, Jon wasn't always keen on the idea of shipping tons of relief aid around the world.

Jon: Prior to working for MCC and even prior to dad working here, I always had questions around material aid and if it's truly necessary. It seemed irresponsible shipping materials across the world, but the more I asked questions about how MCC does its work, the more I realised that, okay, these are not, I wasn't some super genius that had these thoughts. These are thoughts that MCC have truly thought through, and material resources really does need to exist. These supplies are not available everywhere and when things are available, they're purchased, they're not shipped. And so some of those concerns that I had around material aid, the more I ask questions about how MCC does it, the more I realised it aligns with my beliefs around material resources and that this is truly something that I would like to be a part of.

Jon: Whenever we have a tour I always explain that MCC is a relief development and peace organisation, and the material resources hand is that relief hand of MCC. And our job is to not only meet an immediate need, but also bring comfort to those who are receiving our items. I think it means a lot to people knowing that there's people on the other side of the world who truly care about them and are thinking about them.

VO: MCC has been doing relief work since 1920 and over the last century, MCC's material resources efforts have been a long process of adjustments much of it based on feedback from MCC partners who were on the receiving end. Grandma Lebold lived through one of those significant changes.

Elaine (Grandma): Okay. The bulk of my work was sorting the clothing that people donated. They would bring it in green garbage bags, and we would have 50 at a time probably, and we would go through those bags. [fade out]

VO: The used clothing that she and volunteers used to ship was stopped in the early 1970s. Used clothing was an appropriate response in the aftermath of WW2, but after a while MCC leaders realized they could both save money and invest in the local economy by purchasing clothing in the country where they were responding. Incidentally, this gave birth to a huge long-term gift for MCC. Four enterprising Mennonite women in Altona Manitoba, had the idea to re-sell some of this leftover used clothing they were no longer shipping. Today, MCC has over

85 thrift shops across Canada and the US, raising millions of dollars every year for the work of sMCC around the world.

[music break]

Alecia breaks down our kits

Alecia: So name, title, all that stuff. I'm Alecia Weber. I work at the MCC Material Resources Centre in New Hamburg. [f out]

VO: I've asked Alecia to break down a few of the many kits that MCC ships every year. Because in addition to the refinement to what we ship over the years, and the emphasis on quality that Jon mentioned, the contents of these kits also speaks to the specificity of each item that is packed and shipped.

Alecia: So for a school kit, we want four notebooks that total between 500 and 600 pages. And yeah, we're really specific with the notebook numbers, quantity of notebooks and the pages. Because I want to ask kids who come here for scavenger hunt or group packing, I'll ask the one. So you got a full school kit, you only got half a school kit, how do you feel? And a lot of the times, if they're being really nice, they'd be like, oh, I made me sad. Or a lot of times with boys, often I would be angry, I would hit them, I would take it, which those are all genuine answers.

VO: Genuine, but not what you want to see when you're distributing gifts. To minimize even the slight chance of feelings of unfairness, MCC volunteers double and triple check that each kit gets the same items and the same amount of those items. The precision and thoughtfulness of the packing goes beyond just page numbers.

Alecia: And then they get a ruler, a large eraser with the packaging off. Because the places that we send, a lot of them don't have proper waste management necessarily. And how they get rid of garbage might just be burning on a pile on the side of the road. Where here, we can deal with waste a lot better. And then you have eight, ideally uns sharpened pencils, 12 pencil crayons, again, both out of their packaging and four pens, black or blue, and a metal pencil sharpener specifically because the metal ones, they last a lot longer than those plastic ones.

VO: This thoughtful attention to detail extends to all of MCC's kits which are many sewing kits, dignity kits, which are reusable cloth menstrual pads, hygiene kits, care kits, and the classic relief kit.

Relief kit

Alecia: So we got four bath towels. Four bars of laundry soap, bath soap, toothbrushes and here we try to make sure all the toothbrushes are different colours. You don't want to use your dad

or your mom's toothbrush accidentally picking it up and using it, two combs. Again, combs have to be over a specific size or over a minimum length.

VO: The specificity of each kit is informed by evaluations from MCC partners who are receiving and distributing these kits in their communities.

Alecia: So the most recent changes we had was before the school kits only had two pens, and now they have four. The sewing kits we added in a seam ripper, I believe with the dignity kit increase the number of safety pins. But yeah, always looking for partner feedback. The ones using them.

Meat Cannery

VO: Sending different coloured toothbrushes so families can tell whose is whose, or removing the plastic wrapping on an eraser so children in a refugee camp don't have to deal with the garbage, are great examples of small details creating meaningful and thoughtful impact. But sometimes, you gotta make big moves to make a big impact, and there's been no bigger move for Jon and his team, than the new stationary meat cannery.

[b-roll of hissing can seamer]

Jon: There's a buzz on canning days. Everybody in the building, whether it's our long-term thrift volunteers or our comforter makers, everybody kind of feels that buzz and excitement that something's happening. I dunno, it's a special place to be during canning days.

VO: Back in Episode 29, we shared the miraculous story of the creation of this custom-designed 10,000 square foot industrial space where volunteers help to process life-saving food to ship to hungry families around the world in places where meat is impossible to buy locally. The plan was to have 3 active canning days a month starting in April for twelve months in order to meet their commitment to international partners. This was seen as the minimum number of days for the cost of the build to be worth it; it also gave the team plenty of time to warm up to a complicated job. But due to a lot of regulatory hurdles, delays, and processes outside of Jon and Dylans' control they weren't able to start canning until September.

Jon: Which is exactly halfway through our fiscal year, and we committed to having that much meat done for our international partners, and so we're fitting a year's worth of production, which was already going to be somewhat of a stretch, into six months, and so it's been busy. We've been hopping since September.

VO: That means the cannery crew are now canning not three days a month, but 3 days a WEEK for multiple weeks at a time in order to hit their target of canned meat they had promised to MCC's partners around the world. And of course, it has not been without it's hiccups.

Dylan: So my name's Dylan Yantzi. I'm the cannery manager for Mennonite Central Committee. So when we started in September, we kind of thought we knew how this was going to work, but also knew, well, until we do it, we're not really going to know.

Dylan: So yeah, right from basically our second week of operation, we weren't able to get chicken in that week and I had found out earlier than that, even that finding turkey and chicken is going to be more difficult than what I had envisioned or what I was even told the number of months before that would be. Yeah, there's just a lot of things going on in the poultry industry right now, leading to a bit of a shortage. Avian influenza decimated a lot of turkey barns and chicken barns just reduces the supply and the chain.

VO: In addition to this, the high cost of beef and other meat proteins has driven consumers to buy more chicken and turkey which has put a pinch on supply and increases the price. It really makes me grateful that my own work of producing a podcast is not at the mercy of our global economy. I asked Dylan how much it costs to produce a single can of meat.

Dylan: Our cost that we have to cover the whole, right from the can, the label, the lid, everything that goes into the can is \$7. That's 674 grammes of poultry meat and six grammes of salt.

[Broll of the canner in process.]

Dylan: So, this is what is called the canned fed room, so yea the cans come in on [fades out].

VO: The canning process starts in a separate small room where a volunteer takes an empty can off a pallet and sends it down a loopy roller coaster where it is flipped and blown out with an air compressor to remove any debris or dust from the can before it lands open side up on a conveyer belt. From there, someone scoops a teaspoon of salt, then it's filled with meat, weighed, and then a lid sealed by the can seamer which for reasons I don't know emits a lot of steam. From there it passes into another room where another volunteer or two take the cans and put them into big metal baskets that hold 330 cans of meat each. There it is lifted by a winch into the massive pressure cookers called retorts, where it cooks for exactly 131 minutes. Then, the cans are wiped and labeled by hands and packed in boxes. From there, they are shipped to out to feed hungry people around the world.

[Recipient of canned meat, student in Sudan]: Thank you so much for those who have prepared this meat for us, we are really so happy and so glad to have it, because some of us we don't have breakfast at home to take...]

Dylan: Throughout the Bible, it calls for Christians to take care of the hungry. I think we live in a place in the world where we do have an abundance, even though there are hungry people here in our own neighbourhoods and towns. We see that we grow an abundance of livestock and produce in our province and we should be feeding those in our own neighbourhood or around the world.

VO: "Feeding those in our own neighbourhood." Over MCC's 105 year history, MCC has been known for its relief efforts overseas. But unfortunately, there has been a growing need for a food response right here in one of the wealthiest areas of one of the wealthiest countries in the world my home here in Waterloo Region. This is the latest iteration of partner feedback that MCC is responding to.

Jon: One thing that I've noticed or that I see time and time again is the right people seem to show up at the right time [faded out].

VO: The Hallman Foundation has committed \$200,000 per year for the next three years that's equal to 28,000 cans per year of top grade, healthy meat to feed our hungry neighbours.

Jon: We know that the local need for food is going up. If you look at the stats from the Waterloo Regional Food Bank, the stats are staggering on how many people are needing food assistance. This is something that we've been aware of and that we know. At the same time, we have all of our requests from our international partners, so we've got this load from Chad that we've prepared. We're also canning towards Malawi and kind of in the back of our minds this whole time, it's like, yes, there's this need. Yes, our partners need it, but our local partners also need help. And so having the Hallman Foundation step in to provide meat to one of our local partners was just, I mean, it's an answer to prayer at a time. Actually on Wednesday, we are canning the first meat for that project and knowing that the cost of that is covered, is just, I mean I can sleep at night.

Jon: I mean, everything we do is in the name of Christ and that at its core loving our neighbour as ourselves and I think of what I would give to provide to my family in a time of need are exactly what I want to give to others in their time of need. We really want to give our very best, our comforters are all new material, our specifications around sizing and that sort of thing. We're giving new high quality stuff to really show our love for the people, which I think in turn shows Christ's love for all of us.

Dylan: Yeah, I'd say it's been really rewarding from starting just empty warehouse space and finally getting it completed, but then the waiting of all the paperwork that needed to get done so that we could actually officially start, which was a long, painful process to finally starting that first canning day in September and getting that first can of meat rolling off the line and seeing it put later in the day labelled in boxed was been really rewarding.

VO: For Jon, Dylan, Alecia and the whole Material Resources team, there's a deep sense of gratitude and appreciation, not only for the work made possible by generous donors and volunteers, and the knowledge that these gifts are comforting those going through hardship, but also for the opportunity to take part in this work themselves.

Alecia: I didn't know you could really enjoy work or your job. I just kind of like, oh yeah, you get a job so you can make money so you can live it's a whole lot easier getting up in the morning,

that we can help people. It just blows my mind that you and I can come in and just have a blast at work. I'm like, this is awesome!

VO: I agree, it is awesome to enjoy one's job. But is it possible to get too much of a good thing? Seeing the high pace and ambitious scale of the MR team's work, I can't help suggesting it might also be exhausting?

Jon: Yeah. I mean exhausting. I don't know if exhausting is, exhausting is the right term. I think of going to an amusement park.

Jon: So you spend your day on rides, having the time of your life because it was a great day. And so you might look back at it and be like, wow, I was so tired at the end of it. But in the moment you are super excited because I mean, in that case, you're doing something that you love and is meaningful and this work is something we love and is meaningful. So I don't know, I think it's like an amusement park. Sure. At the end of the day I'm exhausted, but just thrilled to be able to be on the ride.

Elaine (Grandma): Like Jon said, it really didn't feel like a job. I looked forward to going every day when I had to go to work. I never, ever, ever hated to go to work. I loved it, and I loved all the people there. I never ever regretted a day of going to MCC, and I always felt that that was the most stabilizing thing in my life, I think was to be of service to others.

Conclusion

VO: And now for my three-tiered action cake for you. The first layer to reflect on is around changed perspective. Was there something in this episode that gave you a new perspective on relief aid or more broadly, how to help someone in need? Have you ever gotten feedback on ways that you have tried to help another, and had to try and absorb that feedback to refine and tweak your methods?

VO: The second layer to reflect on is: how has your changed perspective changed your relationships? Maybe this feedback will lead to a different, more balanced relationship with a friend, or shift how you manage your team at work, or how a volunteer committee at church relates to each other.

VO: The third layer is system change. We heard about feeding the hungry in this episode. What can you and your friends, church, community do about global hunger? I'll include a link in the show notes to a few petitions that address peacebuilding and systemic harm including one from our friends at Canadian Foodgrains Bank who are global leaders in addressing hunger.

VO: And finally, if you want to really get in on the action, please volunteer at your local Material Resources warehouse! If you want to can meat, just know that you have to fundraise the amount of meat that you want to can, a full day of canning is \$7000 and a half day is \$3500. I'll include details in the show notes. The MR team has also let me know that we are urgently in

need of more relief kits, so I'll include a link in the show notes for how you can donate toward relief kits.

- <https://mcc.org/get-involved/giving/designations/kits-and-comforters>
- <https://foodgrainsbank.ca/postcard/>
- <https://mcc.org/campaign/support-fair-canadian-response-climate-change-0>

VO: I want to thank Jon, Alecia, Dylan and the rest of the Material Resources team here in Ontario and across Canada and the US who are riding the roller-coaster and loving it. I'll leave you with a blessing from Grandma Lebold that was initially addressed to her grandchildren, but I'm sure she wouldn't mind extending to all of you.

Elaine (Grandma): I want them all to know that I am extremely happy for them, and I wish the Lord's blessing on every day of their work. And I pray for them continually. And I am sure that if they get as much blessing of doing what they are, as what I did, they will certainly not ever forget.

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I hope you enjoyed this episode, rate and review Undercurrents wherever you listen to podcasts, please share with your friends! Use the discussion guide to facilitate an adult education hour at church. Undercurrents is sponsored in part by Kindred Credit Union. This episode was produced with help from Christen Kong, artwork by Jesse Bergen and theme music by Brian MacMillan. Executive produced by Sandra Reimer.

Thanks for listening, stay tuned for the next episode in two weeks! My name is Ken Ogasawara, have a great rest of your day.