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Remembering Michael J. Sharp

This summer, we remember former MCC worker Michael J. Sharp, who was killed in March 2017 while on his latest peace mission for the United Nations in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DR Congo).

We are so thankful to have had Sharp serve the people of DR Congo alongside us and our partners from 2012 to 2015. Whether he was encouraging armed groups to lay down their weapons or distributing humanitarian supplies to people displaced by violence, he embodied Jesus’ words: “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.”

With the encouragement of Sharp’s parents, John and Michele Sharp, MCC set up a memorial fund dedicated to peacebuilding work in DR Congo; learn more at donate.mcc.org/cause/congo-peace or by calling 888.563.4676.

Michael J. Sharp holds a seed pod as he visits a camp for displaced Syrian children in Lebanon.
Building the future in a time of war

In Lebanon, MCC-supported education programs are reaching out to young Syrian refugees, providing space where they can continue to learn and grow.

STORY BY MARLA PIERSON LESTER
PHOTOS BY MATTHEW SAWATZKY

At home in her village near Aleppo, Syria, Nisrine Issa had a clear vision of what she wanted for her young daughters.

As they grew, they would not just be in school, but in a good school. The classwork they mastered would open doors to opportunities that she, dropping out after sixth grade and marrying at 16, had never had.

That was before — before the bombings began and the streets became a place of death, before the electricity and hot water went away.

By the time the family made it to Lebanon and House of Light and Hope, an MCC-supported education center in Beirut, what Issa wanted most for her girls was far more basic. “Something to make them forget what they saw in Syria,” she says.

She turned to the education programs at the center, hoping to give her daughters a space where they could put the sounds of war behind them and begin to overcome the fear that surfaced whenever they heard an airplane or needed to go out from their home into the neighborhood.

For Syrian refugee children, their parents and the MCC partners who work with them in Lebanon, education is far more than reading and writing. It’s a chance for children and youth to move beyond the horrors they’ve seen. It’s an oasis of routine and stability, regardless of the chaos at home. And it’s a way that young people and their families can build for the future, even as they wait for war to end.

It’s important not to leave a generation of children without the chance to learn, says Rita Abou Atmeh, a social worker at House of Light and Hope.

At the center, tucked into a side street of an impoverished neighborhood in northeast Beirut, Abou Atmeh and other staff work to provide that opportunity to more than 120 Syrian girls.

“When they come to Lebanon, they’ve suffered a lot. They have many difficulties,” Abou Atmeh says. Many have lost years of education, first in Syria as families fled to safer locations or amid news of bombings that hit schools, and then in Lebanon as well. It’s important to give them a chance to learn.

Malak El Khader teaches Arabic numbers at a kindergarten run by MCC partner Popular Aid for Relief and Development, one of several efforts MCC supports in Beirut, Lebanon, to encourage education for Syrian refugees.
families searched for housing and work. Their parents fled war, but in many ways, it is still with them—in the constant flow of news reports on each new round of fighting, in conversations with family and friends in Syria, in the terror of not being able to get through to them.

Living situations are far from ideal. At one point, Nisrine Issa remembers, her family was doubling up with her sister's family—12 people living in the same room. At another, she recalls, she felt desperate enough for income that she would go to work, locking the children inside the home and leaving 8-year-old Razane to care for three younger sisters, including one with disabilities severe enough that she can't walk or feed herself.

Issa quit her job after Razane, alone and in charge, cut her foot badly enough on a can lid that she needed stitches and because of the locked door, no neighbors could get in to help until Issa's husband Mahmoud Issa could get back to the house.

Today, Razane and her 6-year-old sister Riham spend mornings in an upstairs classroom at House of Light and Hope, working on Arabic, English and math. Razane spends the afternoon in public school, studying alongside other Syrian refugees from 2 to 6 p.m. When things are tense at home, the center offers a respite. “They have a friendly space where they can go,” Nisrine Issa says. “They are more relaxed.”

“Psychologically they are getting better,” Mahmoud Issa adds. “They are smiling more. They are happier. They are adapting more.”

That's the progression that House of Light and Hope works hard to gain for students. Each new pupil meets with a psychologist. A social worker makes home visits. A weekly discussion group gives mothers a chance to talk together about the struggles they are facing and to ask for help from the social worker or psychologist leading the session. “It's not enough to work with the child,” says center director Germaine Ephrem.

It's important not to leave a generation of children without the chance to learn.

Students and their families commit to coming to class but also to forming goals and an action plan together—a process that helps children and youth reset their sights on looking forward in their own lives, Ephrem says.

True to its roots in empowering vulnerable Lebanese girls, the center continues to emphasize protecting children from harm, making girls aware of their rights and encouraging them to speak up for themselves if things don't seem right.

Even craft time is about more than making things. Activities are designed so students learn to rely on each other and work together as a team, knitting together new strands of the ties of friendship and community that were torn when they left Syria.

Basic literacy courses give girls who cannot enroll in school a chance to continue to learn and grow.

Classes and tutoring help those who are in school adjust to the education system of a new country.
"At the center, I have the support of the teachers, so I’m learning more," says 12-year-old Gabriela Aslan, whose family fled from Qamishli in far northern Syria to Damascus and then to Lebanon. "They explain the lesson to me and help me understand."

MCC partner Popular Aid for Relief and Development (PARD) works to make that learning happen for the smallest pupils in the Daouk neighborhood of Beirut—a dense maze of makeshift buildings where first Palestinian refugees and now Syrians have found refuge.

Bright yellow paper cut into the shape of the number eight decorates the center of the white board in Yasmin Al Soufi’s kindergarten classroom. Just beneath it, students practice writing their eights.

One pupil comes to the board to count in English, "three, four, five, six..." A neighboring class shouts out numbers in Arabic. Both are needed.

In Syria, classes were taught in Arabic. In Lebanon, English is needed at even the most basic levels of school; it’s the language of instruction, in fact, for math and science classes.

"The English is important and we didn’t have it," says Al Soufi, who trained as a teacher in Syria and, like her pupils, fled because of war. (Read more about her on page 10.) "With English, it will be easier for them."

To her, though, the best part of teaching is not the letters and numbers her pupils are learning. It’s not planting flowers or exploring what animals eat. It’s making room for the everyday delights of childhood.

"I know in the children’s homes, all the talk is negative—about losing, about missing somebody, losing their property, losing their land, missing their future," she says. "Here, we bring them joy, we bring them happiness."

And with each skill that her students master, she sees a direct link back home. The children learning to curve their eights in her classroom today are the future of her country, the generation she believes will play a key role in rebuilding after years of war. "I am teaching my people and trying to compensate for what they lost," she says. "It’s full of meaning for me."

Marla Pierson Lester is managing editor of A Common Place. Matthew Sawatzky is a photographer in Winnipeg, Man.

Give a gift—Education
Your gift makes a difference in classrooms around the world, giving children better chances to learn and grow, improving teaching and increasing opportunities for youth. Give in the enclosed envelope, donate online at donate.mcc.org or by calling your nearest MCC office (see page 2).
I was born in Idlib, Syria, close to the Turkish border. We are a family of six daughters and three sons. My father was working in construction, and all of us were studying. Although the financial situation was not enough, we were happy in that life and felt secure. We had access to everything—food, education, livelihoods.

We continued to study, all of us, until the war started.

My parents came to Lebanon in 2012, but I was in my third year of university, with one year more before I graduated. I insisted on staying in Idlib. I lived with my grandparents and got my education degree. Then, I started a master's program in educational psychology, but the situation in Idlib got worse. In 2014, the bombing reached the street where we were living. I was at home studying with a friend and one of the walls fell down on us. My friend's mother was injured and had to go to the hospital, although she's now recovered.

My sister and I and other relatives fled from Idlib, joining a group of more than 200 people walking to escape. New clashes blocked our way, so we had to walk for one full day on a sandy, rocky path. Some people fainted because they didn't have water. I got separated from my family along the way. After a warning about a bombing, I went into one underground tunnel with people near me, and my family went into another. I couldn't find them when we came out.

At the next town, Ariha, their names were broadcast on the mosque's loudspeaker, but we were not able to find each other until the second day there. There was no rest time on the journey. I got skinnier and skinnier. My situation was not good.

From Ariha, we took a bus to the city of Hama, then found a taxi in Hama to take us to the Lebanese border. Normally a four-hour journey, it took 20 hours to get there. Then the border guards told my sister she was not allowed in because she was under 18 and our father was not with us. We spent eight hours at the border. Eventually they let us in. My family met us in a border town in Lebanon and took us to the home where they were living.

But my struggles weren't over. I spent months searching for a job. I would have an interview in a school, they would say they would call me, but they never did, I think because they didn't take Syrian teachers. I was shocked by the difficulties. In Syria, educators were in great demand. Once you finished your schooling, you would find a job easily. A friend who is Syrian told me about an opening in a kindergarten in Beirut (run by MCC partner Popular Aid for Relief and Development). She was working there, so I was optimistic the school would take Syrian teachers.

I was so excited and happy to find this job. It’s exactly what I was looking for—it’s in my field and it’s working with children.

I started in October 2015 at the beginning of the school year. You know how the beginning of the year is. It was crazy, but we did a lot of activities with the children and things improved day after day.

I have 27 children in my class—12 boys and 15 girls. The classes start at 8, and we finish at 1. Children learn science, Arabic, English and math. We do activities like planting flowers. We talk about good and bad behaviors and what animals eat.

Every day when parents come to pick up the children, I talk to them. We have a parents meeting once a month and talk about things like the work children are doing in school and how to support their learning at home.

Several of the teachers here are Syrian. We speak with the same accent as the children, so the children are not feeling that something is strange or different; they feel like they are speaking with somebody they know.

Education is very important for any child. It will help them in all their lives. If they do want to study at the highest levels, they can. If they stop, they’ll at least know how to read and write. My hope is to teach at the university level, and I think I will reach that one day.
Protecting childhood

In Lebanon and elsewhere, MCC-supported programs help children heal from trauma they’ve experienced, educate them about their rights and strive to protect them from future harm.

By Doreen Martens

In a sunny, walled courtyard in Tyre, Lebanon, a boy of about 10 cups his hands in front of his face, imagining in them a little bird waiting to hear what he most misses about his home back in Syria. “All my toys,” he whispers in Arabic. Then, with a shy smile, he flings his arms wide, releasing the imaginary bird into the sky with a wish that the bird will fly over his old home and say hello to his toys.

The next boy in the circle does the same, whispering to the bird that he misses his two older brothers, who have gone elsewhere to find work. The bird flies off to visit his brothers. The game, which aims to help children regain positive feelings and a sense of connection with what they have lost, is a healing exercise for the 30 or so Syrian refugee children gathered here, all coping with the trauma of fleeing the life they once knew.

Through a program funded by MCC and run by local partner Popular Aid for Relief and Development (PARD), about 200 children ages 7 to 12 gather weekly in three locations in southern Lebanon. Behind the carefully planned games and activities, interwoven with stories and laughter, are serious lessons. In Lebanon, as elsewhere around the world, MCC is striving to give partners such as PARD training and tools to help children who have experienced trauma, and to fund work that encourages healing but also protection from further harm.

While adults ultimately are responsible for children’s safety, programs such as this also teach young people about their rights and empower them to ask for help when needed. PARD project manager Rashid El Mansi says the program, now in its second year, concentrates on children with the highest needs. PARD representatives went into southern Lebanese communities to put together a list of children facing particular struggles, such as two daughters whose father, out of exaggerated fears, refuses to let them out of the home except to go to the mosque.

The children and their families are from unofficial Palestinian refugee communities that have swelled with the Syrian influx. Some live cramped into tiny, sparsely furnished rented rooms. Others are in informal tented communities scattered around the rural areas where they have found landholders willing to rent them a patch of earth.

Under the economic and social pressures presented by so many refugees flooding the region, prejudices and tensions are barriers to a peaceful co-existence. A sort of social pecking order among Lebanese, long-time Palestinian residents, Syrians and Syrian Palestinian newcomers makes the situation even more difficult.

Bringing children together from these groups is one way to build peace and understanding.

Program coordinator Fadia Dahshe says most of the children “didn’t know each other before. Now they’re starting to talk to each other.”

She recalls that they all refused to play with a boy who, as some hungry refugees are forced to do, earned a little money by collecting people’s household garbage, for about 65 cents per home. “Now,” she says, “they’re starting to accept him.”

For Dahshe, helping children extends to empowering their mothers, who carry a huge burden of trying to keep life and limb together, and often fail to take care of their own mental health needs.

She gathers moms to talk about their troubles and to help them take an active role in their communities—sometimes taking a group session to

If you have a group, you will be stronger.
A growing emphasis

MCC, like many other organizations, is putting an increased emphasis on child protection, which includes preventing and responding to violence, exploitation and abuse. For years, some MCC-supported programs have included lessons on rights, protection and the importance of asking for help. Today, MCC also is asking that all partners who work with youth under 18 develop their own child protection policies and procedures, if they didn’t have ones in place.

Read more in the Summer 2016 issue of Intersections: MCC Theory and Practice Quarterly, mcc.org/stories/intersections, including an account of confronting sexual abuse in Kenya.

Of hope, resilience and loss: Five days inside Syria

By Doug and Naomi Enns

For the past four years, the Syrian crisis and the partners and projects we support inside Syria have been a daily part of our work and our prayers, but because of the dangers of the war, we haven’t been able to travel there. We’ve met with our partners when they come to Beirut. We’ve texted back and forth late at night as they reframed mortar fire or bombs as outdoor music. We’ve gotten photos of Aleppo as it was under fire—and of day-old babies born to partner staff.

And over and over, our partners have invited us to join them, inside Syria, to see with our own eyes what they are living from day to day. This spring, we had five precious days to do that. After carefully weighing our partners’ assessment that security had improved for the time being, we got the chance to visit MCC partners and projects in Damascus, in the Qalamoun Valley and in Homs. Wherever we went we were greeted with Salt that an Arabic proverb says makes us bread and hope through new eyes—seeing that life not only remains in Syria; with a little help, it continues to bloom. And through our partners, we experienced hope, we saw resilience. We saw hardship and terrible loss. And we saw people really wanting to live.

We went to Syria to bear witness to this determination and faith—and to share the bread and salt that an Arabic proverb says makes us a family. We went to humbly receive thanks for MCC’s work so we can pass it on those who support MCC.

And through our partners, we experienced hope through new eyes—seeing that life not only remains in Syria; with a little help, it continues to bloom.

Read more online!

Go to mcc.org to see “Of hope, resilience and loss: Five days inside Syria,” a web piece that includes reflections from the Ennses and photos, video clips and audio from their visit. Check out a school class singing “The Wheels on the Bus,” and hear the sounds of worship in a Syrian Orthodox congregation established in 59 A.D.

Doreen Martens is a freelance writer in Oakville, Ontario.
New skills, old phones

In Cambodia, MCC-supported training in cell phone repair helps provide an alternative to migrating for work.

STORY BY RACHEL BERGEN

In Cambodia, MCC-supported training

I n Mesang, a rural village of rice fields and mango trees in Cambodia’s Prey Veng province, the high school is the biggest building by far, with 500 students enrolled.

On site is a small room that has been used for vocational training for the past six years. With the support of MCC, a local organization called Organization to Develop Our Villages (ODOV) began offering classes in sewing and cosmetology so people, mostly women, didn’t have to leave the village for training or for jobs in Cambodia’s capital Phnom Penh or out of the country entirely.

This year, though, 11 motivated teen-age boys sit around a work bench strewn with wires and extension cords.

“They wear head lamps, wield soldering irons and learn to fix cell phones from a local man who owns an electronics repair store. They are the first group of students to take part in a new, MCC-supported small electronics training program through ODOV.”

Mot Reaksah, one of these teens, lives with his grandmother and sister while his mother and older brothers work at factories in Phnom Penh. They send money back to support Mot, but rarely come to visit because the trip is so long and the taxi fare is expensive.

Before enrolling in the new program, Mot envisioned supporting his family by working long hours for meager pay in Mesang, or moving away from his family home.

“I thought maybe I would always drive tractors for farmers,” he says. “That’s what I do in my free time and when I don’t have school in September and October. I also could migrate for work like my mom and two brothers and work in a factory.”

Vocational training is an important way of keeping rural families together, says Kong Saoroeth, an ODOV staff member who works with the vocational training program.

“As an organization, and as residents of Mesang, we had a strong desire to find a way to keep children in the villages,” Kong says. “There were already too many moving away and not coming back. There simply wasn’t any work for them (in Prey Veng).”

Around the world, MCC supports vocational training programs that help give people new skills to support themselves and their families without leaving home. These range from baking courses in Bolivia to tailoring training in Nepal and auto mechanics courses in Rwanda.

Through this program in Cambodia, students are learning to repair older, inexpensive cell phones as well as iPhones and Androids, which some families save up to buy in order to stay in contact with family members and use Facebook.

As the need for people skilled in cell phone repair continues to grow, ODOV is expanding and changing this program in order to meet community needs that aren’t currently being met and to provide services in certain parts of the province where they aren’t available. ODOV still offers sewing and cosmetology classes in high schools in Prey Veng, but mostly women take them.

The small electronics class offers an opportunity for young men to gain new ways to contribute to their household income, and it helps to ensure the market isn’t too saturated with people who have learned any one kind of trade.

In addition to cell phones, ODOV plans to expand the program to teach students how to fix other small electronics, like fans and small motors.

As the need for people skilled in cell phone repair continues to grow, ODOV is expanding and changing this program in order to meet community needs that aren’t currently being met and to provide services in certain parts of the province where they aren’t available.

Meanwhile, Mot is already implementing what he’s learned in a new after-school business. “Well, I really like learning the new skills,” he says, “but I also really like that I am able to make a bit of money while learning them.”

He goes to neighbors to collect phones that have problems. “They really appreciate it because I will pick them up and drop them off at their door, and I like it because I get practice and can make some money—and around 5,000 to 10,000 riel (or $1.25 to $2.50) a month,” he says.

That may not sound like much, but it’s enough to help his family and contribute toward his school fees. And this is just the beginning. Mot now says that when he graduates from high school, the skills he’s learned will be put to use for a new goal—paying his way through university.

Rachel Bergen is a staff writer for MCC Canada.
Advocacy support worker

Name: Anna Vogt
Hometown: Dawson City, Yukon (Mennonite Church of Canada)
Assignment: To encourage and build bridges for advocacy on issues that affect the Latin American and Caribbean countries where MCC works.

Typical day: Working from Bogotá, Colombia, I research and update MCC’s Latin American advocacy blog. As I travel, I lead workshops on advocacy, learn from MCC’s partners and encourage connections. I’m always trying to explore how partners are working for change in their communities and how MCC can connect with their efforts.

Joys: Despite trauma, conflict and death, every day I hear and see those around me continuing to build the future, together. I love entering a new place, unsure of what I will encounter, and leaving encouraged by the good and creative ways local organizations and communities are working for social justice. And I love sharing their stories.

On a recent trip to Guatemala and Mexico to learn about migration, I was reminded of my own family’s Russian Mennonite journey of leaving farm-lands in Ukraine to search for a better life. Being able to see these connections and talk to those migrating is a joy and privilege but also a call to action.

Find your place
MCC has workers in Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America and the Middle East, as well as in Canada and the U.S. Go to mcc.org/serve, contact your nearest MCC office or follow @serveMCC on Twitter to learn about current service opportunities. MCC workers are expected to exhibit a commitment to Christian faith, active church membership and biblical peacemaking.
Need a summer project?

Make an MCC relief kit.

When you donate supplies for a relief kit, they are packed in a handy bucket and sent to families in Syria, Iraq, Ukraine and other countries. With so many families displaced from home by war and disaster, we need your help now to provide vital supplies.

mcc.org/kits

**CONTENTS** (NEW items only, in original packaging)

4 large bars bath soap
1 plastic bottle shampoo (13–24 oz; place in resealable plastic bag)
4 large bars laundry soap (Some stores carry Fels Naptha®, Sunlight® or Zote® brands)
4 adult-size toothbrushes
4 new bath towels (medium weight, dark or bright colors)
2 wide-tooth combs (6–8 in)
1 fingernail clipper (good quality)
1 box adhesive bandages (minimum 40 count, assorted)
1 package sanitary pads (18–24 count thin maxi)

Thank you for limiting your generosity to the items listed. Deliver contents to an MCC drop-off location (find list at mcc.org/kits or contact your nearest MCC office), and we will pack them into a new 5-gallon bucket with lid. Don’t have a drop-off location nearby? You can give “cash for kits.” Choose this option on the enclosed envelope or give online at donate.mcc.org.