

Chez nous

MCH STAFF NEWSLETTER | Published by Communications | montrealchildrenshospital.ca

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After more than 10 years of waiting **A kidney for Mario**

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After spending his life on dialysis, a teenager finally receives a kidney

This is the most complex kidney transplant ever performed at the MCH

By Christine Bouthillier

The daily life of 14-year-old Mario changed radically last January. After waiting all his life, the Montreal Children's Hospital (MCH) patient finally received a particularly complex kidney transplant, a first in Canada.

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► Above: Back row, from l. to r.: Paule Comtois, Catherine Giroux, Israa Bamogaddam, Myriam Carlos, Abigail Brodovitch, Dr. Beth Foster and Dr. Indra Gupta. Seated, from l. to r.: Dr. Nivedita Pande, Dr. Mallory Downie, Dr. Marie-Michèle Gaudreault-Tremblay, Dr. Jean Tchervenkov and Nathaniel Mosseau. Missing from photo: Dr. Muneera Alabdulqader, Cynthia Dion, Marilyn Gauvin, Breanne Laird, Dora Persico, Arvin Arenas, Marta Rodrigues, Isilda Nascimento, Nathalie Liboiron and Nathalie Aubin.

Mario was born prematurely with a congenital kidney malformation. Both his kidneys never functioned normally. From birth, he had to undergo dialysis treatments at home to clean his blood.

At the age of three, he received his first kidney transplant. Unfortunately, his body rejected the organ and Mario became fully sensitized, meaning that he developed antibodies against practically all possible kidney donors. Finding a donor was going to be difficult. He had to turn to dialysis again, this time at the MCH.

This was the beginning of a wait that lasted almost 12 years.

"I went to the hospital three or four times a week for dialysis. During the treatments, I had nothing else to do but wait for the day to end," explains the teenager.

Attending school only two days a week, he feels that his illness has limited his interactions with other children.

"It was difficult because I liked going to school," he says.

"Children on dialysis are there at Christmas, at Easter... They still have to come to the hospital to receive their treatments because their lives depend on it. They develop a strong connection with the staff," adds Dr. Indra Gupta, nephrologist at the MCH.

As a teenager, Mario began to lose hope, thinking that he would probably never receive a kidney and that he would



► Mario wishes to honour the memory of his uncle Franco, whose tragic death enabled him to receive a kidney.

have to remain on dialysis until scientific advances provided another solution.

THE CALL THAT CHANGED EVERYTHING

In 2024, a few days before Christmas, Mario and his family received terrible news: Mario's uncle had suffered a cardiac arrest and was in a coma. The medical team soon announced that nothing more could be done for him. Amid the heartbreak, Mario received an unexpected and life-changing gift: his uncle Franco's kidney, offered by his uncle's son.

"Because it was a family member, there was less risk of rejection," explains Dr. Gupta. "But the MCH had never performed a transplant on someone with such high sensitization before."

Mario still had antibodies against this donor, but it was the best match he had so far. The medical team decided to go ahead. It was the first time in Canada that a kidney transplant had been performed on a child who had antibodies against the donor.

After consulting the scientific literature and several world experts on these very rare cases, the team developed a desensitization protocol and then proceeded with the transplant. It was also the first time that the MCH accepted a donation after cardiac death, emphasizes Dr. Mallory Downie, nephrologist at the MCH.

"As I was in hospital, I couldn't go to my uncle's funeral. The situation left me with bittersweet feelings," says Mario, happy to have finally received a kidney but sad to have lost a cherished family member.

The family wanted to honour the memory of and thank Mario's uncle Franco, and especially his son Alex for the loving gesture.

"First of all, we would like to thank his girlfriend Liliana who, on December 21, 2024, saved Franco by calling 9-1-1, bringing him back to life. Otherwise, we would not be where we are today. We also thank the entire nephrology team,

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the transplant team and the social worker who assisted us in an excellent way. Thanks also to the dialysis team for the care and support they have given Mario over the years. A hug to everyone!" says Giuseppe, Mario's father.

The teenager mentions he is proud to have participated in a unique surgery and in the development of knowledge that could potentially help other patients in his situation.

A NEW LIFE BEGINS

Today, Mario is doing well. His new kidney is working and there are no signs of rejection at the moment.

"I can eat more of my favourite foods!" he says happily, looking forward to finally being able to enjoy ice cream with summer just around the corner.

The catheter used for his dialysis will also be removed soon. He will now be able to play sports without fear of hitting the catheter.

"For the first time in his life, he will be able to go swimming!" explains Dr. Marie-Michèle Gaudreault-Tremblay, Director of the Kidney Transplant Program at the MCH.

NUMBER OF KIDNEY TRANSPLANTS ON THE RISE

The number of kidney transplants at the MCH almost tripled in 2024 compared to previous years. In fact, nine transplants were performed last year, compared to about three or four annually during the years of the pandemic, when transplants had decreased.

"One of the strengths of our program is the unique collaboration we have with the adult teams, who are under the same roof as us at the Glen site of the MUHC," explains Dr. Gaudreault-Tremblay.

In fact, 60 percent of transplants performed at the MCH come from a living donor. In such cases, the MCH staff cannot take care of the donor, who is very often one of the child's parents.

"Our responsibility is to look after the interests of our patient, who is the child. Ethically, we cannot also look after the donor," adds the nephrologist.

This is why people who wish to donate a kidney are usually referred to another hospital, which they must contact themselves. The facility then coordinates with the pediatric hospital.

Working with the McGill University Health Centre (MUHC) Living Donor Program facilitates communications. It also makes it easier to plan the transplant, since the operating rooms and intensive care teams that will receive the child and the donor are in the same place.

"The other parent can therefore visit both their child and the donor parent in the same hospital," emphasizes Dr. Gaudreault-Tremblay.

Earlier preparation of candidates has also allowed faster access to kidney transplants and reduced the time spent on dialysis, which may have influenced the increase in the number of kidney transplants.

"Everything is organized in advance, the donor has already been found, and as soon as the child's kidney function falls below a certain threshold, the transplant can be performed. We are doing more and more preemptive transplants, before the patient needs dialysis," she says.

It's timely news for National Organ and Tissue Donation Awareness Week, held this year from April 20 to 26. ❁

Chez nous is published by the MCH Communications office.








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On the cover:
Mario, aged 14, recently received a kidney transplant after being on dialysis for more than a decade.

Cover photo: Christine Bouthillier

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Hard work and a solid plan spell success for nursing recruit from Colombia

By Maureen McCarthy

Laura Correa first thought about moving to Montreal while she was a nursing student in Bogotá, Colombia, after attending presentations at her university by staff from McGill University as well as Université de Montréal about student exchange opportunities. Although she never ended up doing an exchange, the seed was planted to learn more about Montreal.

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► Above: Laura Correa works on the B9 Unit of the Montreal Children's Hospital.



► Laura is passionate about pediatric care.

As Laura began to research the possibilities of moving north, she discovered that Montreal was an excellent fit for her and her husband. And as she read more about the nursing profession in Quebec, and the working environment and academic requirements, she decided it would be a good idea to pursue it further.

After completing her bachelor of nursing degree in 2021, Laura began work in Bogotá, gaining valuable experience in pediatric intensive care and emergency. With her long-term goal in mind, she also started French lessons.

Pediatric care is something Laura is passionate about. “I love children and I knew that I really wanted to continue working with them,” she says. “So I

checked for the options to work with children in Montreal and discovered that McGill University is linked with this incredible pediatric hospital [the Montreal Children’s Hospital], and it’s also bilingual, which is good since I already knew English.”

A MULTI-STEP PROCESS

For nurses and other healthcare professionals from other countries, the process of finding work and immigrating to Quebec is supported by Recrutement Santé Québec (RSQ). Its website provides information on topics such as the recruitment process, required qualifications including French proficiency, life in Quebec and available job opportunities. RSQ staff also work with interested candidates to help them through the process.

In October 2022, Laura sent documents to the Ministère de l’Immigration, de la Francisation et de l’Intégration to start her nursing equivalence process. Several months later, she submitted her documents to the Ordre des infirmières et infirmiers du Québec (OIIQ). She then had her first interview with RSQ to assess her level of French and knowledge as a clinical nurse.

For the OIIQ, Laura had to complete a comprehensive document to demonstrate what she had learned to date in Colombia as well as information about her work experience. “It’s a very detailed process and it took me about two months to complete,” she says.

Successful candidates are then expected to complete a year of additional courses in a nursing program in Quebec, or do a stage in hospital to demonstrate and be evaluated on their skills.

“It’s harder to get a stage, but fortunately, I got one,” says Laura. She received OIIQ approval for her internship in October 2023.

Early in the process, Laura also interviewed with people at McGill University and the McGill University Health Centre Human Resources team.

After a full two years of completing all the necessary steps, Laura and her husband arrived in Montreal on December 28 last year.

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A WARM WELCOME TO THE MCH

Laura was assigned to the B9 Unit at the Montreal Children's Hospital (MCH), and before starting to work with patients, she went through a two-week orientation along with other new recruits to the unit.

Atif Abbas, Senior Advisor – Welcoming/Orientation/Integration-Student placement & Education for the MCH and Ambassador for the MCH, has played a key role in supporting Laura during her internship.

“Laura’s journey exemplifies dedication, resilience and a deep passion for pediatric nursing. Supporting her integration into our team has been a privilege,” says Atif. “Her commitment to continuous learning and excellence in patient care is truly inspiring.”

Atif explains that the MCH is committed to fostering the growth and success of every new recruit — whether international or local — by ensuring a seamless transition, providing strong support, offering meaningful learning opportunities and cultivating a true sense of belonging.

“My sincere thanks go to Joseph Van der Sluys, Andrée-Anne Matte, Veronique Ngu, Kanwal Idrees, Vanessa Deschênes and Jennifer Polson from the B9 team, as well as my colleagues in Human Resources Catherine Hébert and Valérie Lacombe, for their essential contributions and continued support throughout

this process. Their dedication and teamwork have been instrumental in ensuring a smooth and supportive transition for Laura.”

Laura’s experience so far has exceeded her expectations. “It’s so good here and I’m delighted with everything,” she says. An important factor which Laura recognized from the start is how patient safety is key to the unit’s work. She also says the level of support and encouragement are great.

“Everyone is so welcoming and kind. I feel respected and valued here.”

After successfully completing her internship, Laura recently received the *candidate à l'exercice de la profession infirmière* designation, or CEPI as it's commonly

called, from the OIIQ. She will continue to work while she prepares for the OIIQ exams in September and once completed, she'll sit for her French exams.

One of the reasons Laura was drawn to Montreal is its strong university network and the opportunity to continue her studies at some point. And Montreal is proving to be a good choice for her and her husband who are discovering how much they like its multicultural environment. “We are super glad we made this decision.”

What’s more, Laura is fast becoming an excellent ambassador for working in Quebec. “Since starting at the MCH, I’ve been telling my friends in Colombia what it’s like to work here. A lot of them are now inspired to learn French!” ❁



► Laura appreciates the support received from the B9 Unit team. Here she is with her colleague Vanessa Deschênes (left).



Volunteers at the heart of healing: generations united for a good cause

By Caroline Fabre

Each year, National Volunteer Week highlights those individuals who, through their generosity and kindness, transform the daily lives of countless people. At the Montreal Children’s Hospital (MCH), volunteering takes on a thousand faces. Julia, Margaret and Elisabeth represent three very different paths, each bringing a unique perspective to the art of help and compassion.

Margaret Annyas and Elisabeth Gibbon have known each other for a long time, having worked together at the old MCH site. Their volunteer stories perfectly illustrate the continuity and passion that drive healthcare professionals, even after retirement.

For Margaret, who spent 34 years as an assistant head nurse in the operating room in ophthalmological and plastic surgery, volunteering was born from a chance conversation in the hospital cafeteria. Encouraged by her former colleagues

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► Above: Julia Persechino is a volunteer on the Hematology-Oncology Unit.

and driven by a deep desire to remain connected to the healthcare world, she took the plunge just a few years after her retirement.

Originally from England and having worked as a nurse at the Royal London Hospital before moving to Montreal and embarking on a lengthy career at the MCH, Elisabeth also began volunteering before the MCH moved to the Glen site in 2015. Initially called upon to help organize the transfer of documents from the old hospital to the new, she quickly became an essential figure in the Emergency Department, accumulating over 3,800 volunteer hours. She first worked as a nurse, then as a public relations professional and ombudsman before taking on volunteering in her retirement, reflecting her tireless commitment to patients and their families.

Julia Persechino represents the new generation of volunteers. A neuroscience student at McGill University, she was drawn to the hospital long before she started giving her time to volunteer, having already raised funds for the MCH Foundation during her CEGEP years. Her journey shows how community involvement can start early and grow into a deep calling.

MULTIPLE ROLES

Margaret greets families at the hospital's main entrance, near the sculpture of the iconic yellow bus. Her approach is simple but effective: offering a warm smile, encouraging nervous visitors to take a deep breath and guiding them with the calmness of a retired healthcare professional. Each interaction is an opportunity to turn a moment of anxiety into a more peaceful experience.

In the Emergency Department, Elisabeth is a reassuring presence. She helps families navigate the area, distributes books to distract anxious children and ensures everyone is in the right place. During the pandemic, her role became crucial as she meticulously checked for compliance with sanitary protocols. Her constant and caring presence brings invaluable comfort during times of great vulnerability.

For Julia, she is able to provide joy and relief on the Hematology-Oncology Unit (B7), where every shift is an opportunity to make a difference.



► Elisabeth Gibbon lends her support to families presenting at the MCH Emergency Department.

“I realized that once I started, I was hooked. It gives me something to look forward to during the week. Between studying and home life, everything is so busy. So knowing that I have this time reserved to have fun, help and play with the kids, it really brings me joy.”

One moment that particularly stood out for her was when a young patient, who she had played with several times, called Julia “her best friend at the hospital”. Over time, they had built a beautiful relationship, making each visit more comforting for the young patient.

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► Margaret Annyas welcomes patients and their families at the main entrance of the hospital.

BEYOND VOLUNTEERING

Each of these volunteers has their own motivation, their own story that explains their commitment. But what strikes them the most is the profound gratitude they receive from patients and their families. Each one recounts moments when a simple gesture, a smile or an attentive presence was met with almost palpable appreciation.

“We don’t always realize the effect of our actions,” Julia explains. “It really has taught me that even small things can have a big impact.”

“The essence of the MCH is to take care of everyone. Not just the children, but also the parents. Whether it’s them, the staff, the volunteers or the patients, everyone is important,” adds Elisabeth.

These experiences go beyond simple, occasional help. For Margaret and Elisabeth, it is a natural continuation of their careers in the hospital setting.

“When I retired in my 60s, I thought ‘Oh my God, I can do whatever I want!’ And eventually, I tried volunteering,” shares Margaret. “It’s been over 20 years now. People are very kind and I feel like I can help them. They’re nervous, worried about their child. As a former healthcare professional, I understand that. And when someone is friendly and helpful, it really makes a big difference.”

For Julia, it is a source of motivation for her future career as a researcher. “My time here has made me want to do cancer research,” she explains, now working in a laboratory studying liquid biopsies, a new technology detecting genetic information in body fluids.

Margaret continues to invest herself further by training new volunteers, passing on her knowledge and experience. As for Elisabeth, she remains a pillar in the Emergency Department, providing support and comfort to families.

A WEEK TO CELEBRATE

While National Volunteer Week, which takes place this year from April 27 to May 3, is an opportunity to shine a light on their commitment, Margaret, Julia, Elisabeth and all the other volunteers at the MCH embody the very essence of altruism well beyond these few days.

Although their stories are different, these three big-hearted individuals share the same beliefs: that every gesture counts, that every smile can lighten a burden and that kindness knows no age. ❁

Spring has sprung at the MCH!

By Caroline Fabre

It's not just groundhogs and other animals coming out of hibernation this spring, the entire Montreal Children's Hospital (MCH) seems to be waking up with the return of warmer temperatures and sunshine! With special visits and memorable celebrations, the start of 2025 has been filled with unforgettable moments that brought together our patients, their families and hospital staff.

After two big snowstorms, it was time to celebrate love at the MCH! Thanks to the Quality of Life at Work Committee, our staff enjoyed a well-deserved break with delicious hot chocolate topped with whipped cream, marshmallows and sprinkles (or all three for those with the biggest sweet tooth!) And what better way to embrace creativity on Valentine's Day than with cookies? Different teams had fun decorating festive cookies with icing and colorful toppings. Thanks to the MCH Foundation for funding the committee.



Players from McGill University's Redbirds football team swapped their usual playing field for the eighth floor of the MCH! Our young patients had the chance to chat with them, receive team jerseys and even toss the ball around. But the fun didn't stop there! The Redbirds also took time to meet and take pictures with our staff.

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We were delighted to welcome the Queen and her court, accompanied by Paddy the mascot, to celebrate St. Patrick's Day. With crowns, shamrock stickers and Irish flags in hand, they helped get our young patients ready for the 200th St. Patrick's Day Parade, which took place on March 16.



In March, the MCH staff also had the opportunity to meet some special feathered and furry guests: ducks, rabbits, goats and even chickens from Project PACE farm joined the fun, bringing an extra special touch to this wonderful day.



Fred the Groundhog woke up a little early from hibernation to visit the MCH clinics in January, giving out hugs, stickers and high fives to our young patients and care teams.



Thanks to the Quality of Life at Work Committee, MCH staff had a chance to enjoy some delicious maple taffy as Le Sucrier Urbain set up right outside the hospital.