

Show notes:

Impact report for Material Resource volunteers:

<https://mcccanada.ca/learn/about/annual-reports/impact-report-material-resources-summer-2021>

New! MCC's Dignity Kits:

Provide sustainable support for vulnerable women and girls!

<https://mcccanada.ca/dignity-kits>

Story of MR champions at Grantham MB Church:

<https://mcccanada.ca/stories/its-privilege-joy-serve-way>

Credits:

Edited by Christen Kong

Mixed by Francois Goudreault of [Hello Francy Sound and Music](#)

Production Research by Seun Olowo-Ake

Original music by [Brian MacMillan](#)

Artwork by [Jesse Bergen](#)

Undercurrents: Season 2: Episode 3: "Giving gifts/receiving gifts"

VO: *This episode briefly mentions suicide; we don't go into detail, but it is a part of one person's story. Please take care as you listen.*

[music break]

VO: *You are listening to Undercurrents. My name is Ken Ogasawara and I'm part of the Communications and Community Engagement team at Mennonite Central Committee in Ontario. This podcast is an ongoing experiment to find a new way to tell the stories coming from our community of partners, program participants, staff, and others.*

Undercurrents is brought to you by Kindred Credit Union. Kindred's purpose is cooperative banking that connects values and faith with finances; inspiring peaceful, just, and prosperous communities. Built on a radical vision to see mutual aid put into faithful practice, Kindred works alongside partners like MCC to empower communities both locally and globally.

This episode is about making gifts and receiving gifts.

[music break]

VO: *Material Resources. Out of all the programs we have at MCC in Ontario, Material Resources, as a name of a program, is kinda dry. While other program names range from descriptive, like Migration and Resettlement, to poetic, like Walking with People in Poverty or Indigenous Neighbours, to darn near inspirational, like Restorative Justice, but Material Resources is just, what is it, even?*

JON: *Material Resources is one of the relief hands of MCC.*

VO: *This is Jon Lebold, Material Resources Coordinator for Ontario.*

JON: We collect items in-in Canada and the US to ship overseas to people in need.

[music break]

JON: We work off of a request model from our partners who are living and working in country. They know the needs. They live and they work there, and they know what's available, locally for in-country purchases. If items are available, then they prioritize the in-country purchase of goods. Where Material Resources fits in is when those items aren't available, for whatever reason, then our partners can reach out and request them from us. And then we go out and collect those items from all of our donors and prepare them and ship them to the people in need.

VO: *There is much about relief aid that is necessarily utilitarian, essentials-only, since it is being sent to people who, in many cases, have lost everything. And when I say 'lost everything', I'm not exaggerating. Consider the contents of an MCC relief kit, which include such basics like shampoo, laundry soap, toothbrushes, towels. When you're in a position where even these basic necessities are not available, it's easy to imagine how catastrophic their loss has been, through war or natural disasters. But despite, or maybe because of, the dire conditions people find themselves in, the Material Resources department aims to elevate the aid that they send. Here's Jon again:*

Jon: All of the items that we're sending are gifts. And when gift giving, we want to always give our best. If I were to give you my blanket that I had as a child that I loved, and it's the most valuable possession in the world to me, even though it's ripped and dirty and torn, if I were to give that to you and tell you that, it would mean a lot more to you than if I were to mail you that comforter without any kind of explanation. We need the quality of the item to speak for itself.

VO: *Jon's example of his favourite blanket is a good one, because one of MCC's signature relief items, is the comforter.*

LORI: So, you want from the beginning?

VO: *A comforter is a handmade blanket, usually 60 inches wide by 80 inches long. I've asked Lori Koch, a long time Material Resources volunteer, to walk us through the steps of creating a comforter so that we can fully appreciate what goes into it.*

[music break]

LORI: Where does it begin? Well, people know that we do comforters, so they bring in all their stashes. We sort through it, and we start putting it as pieces small enough to cut into blocks.

VO: *A block is a 10" or 8" square of fabric used to create the unique and beautiful patterns on the comforter top.*

LORI: These cupboards over here is where they get put into different. They're all sorted by size and color. Pastel prints, pastel solids, greens, purples, dark prints, light prints, browns...[audio fades]

VO: *There is an astonishing number of colour categories that these blocks are divided into. They take the design process very seriously.*

LORI: *And so, divided into weights of fabrics, heavies, lights [audio fades and becomes chopped clips] Kay, so then, and then we make the line, and then, and then, so then we go back, all done, then it goes over to the men usually because they need something to do. [laughs] They're pretty picky about how good the comforters look when they're sent out.*

[music ends]

VO: *It takes about 8 hours to create a comforter from start to finish. Over the last five years alone, MCC has shipped over a quarter million of these hand made, unique comforters from the US and Canada. Over MCC's 100 year history, the number of comforters lovingly hand sewn and sent to those in need is uncountable.*

Now, in this day in age, it is quite possible that MCC could bulk order tens of thousands of factory-made blankets and save a lot of labour. So why do we continue to hand-make our comforters?

[music begins]

JON: *We need the quality of the item to speak for itself. We need the materials that we're sending to be of such high quality and our comforters to be so beautiful that when the people receive them, they truly can feel that we care about them and that we haven't forgotten about them.*

[music break]

LORI: *I like to be able to do something that might help somebody else have a bit better of something. Like, I put myself in their position thinking what would I do with. I think of all the blankets I have on my back, and especially in the winter time, and I'm thinking, even one comforter, it's better than nothing. But even that, I would find hard to manage with one blanket. But yet on the other hand, if they have nothing, this at least is something that they can feel that somebody somewhere in the world is thinking of them.*

[music ends]

VO: *Here's a story about how one such handmade item changed the life of a young girl in a refugee camp over 40 years ago.*

[SFX/large truck moving by]

LY: *I can't believe it, after all these year, you're still around. I'm still around. We still see each other, cause a long, long time ago, I thought once all these kid grow up, I may never know them again.*

VO: *This is Ly Vang. Her kids and I grew up in the same small town community in Southwestern Ontario. She now lives in Kitchener and has five children and six grandchildren, most of whom live under the same roof with her. Her daughter-in-law is my co-worker, graphic designer extraordinaire Shoua Vang, who*

brought out a bowl of lychee fruit to the back patio where Ly and I were sitting on a beautiful summer day. But the story of how Ly got here starts in Laos, in the early 1970s.

LY: When I grew up, my dad have two, they call "wet land farm," and then they also have a mountain-side farm.

[SFX/children playing, birds chirping]

LY: My childhood I have a lot of freedom, good memory that I have my own horse. My white horse, which usually my dad would send me to go and pick up tool from my other uncles, aunts, and sometime when we ran out of salt, they would say, "you go and pick up some salt and peppers from auntie's." So, jump on my horse and I feel like flying.

VO: *Through creeks, valleys, and hills, Ly would fly through the lush countryside. She says she felt as free as a butterfly.*

LY: I remember some of my friends and I went to school and they were ride a bike and they were, you know, talking about how fast their bike and how beautiful their bikes, and I feel pretty bad. But in time, I also said to myself that, no I don't need to get mad on that because my horse is the best. 10 time better, and so that is still some of the memory that I, yeah...[trails off]

[music ends]

VO: *Then, the Vietnam war began to spread into Laos where Ly and her community lived.*

LY: So when Vietnam broke, we left everything behind. Like the farm, the house, the houses. And so, when we, when we leave my dad to took my white horse and other, our brown horse. And we took two horses basically to carry our food. And then we crossed the mountain, the rivers. We walk on foot sometimes, all day till midnight. Sometime we even walk at night because of the dangers. And so, when we get to Thailand, we move into a refugee. And in the refugee, there was no food for the two horse.

VO: *Ly's father was forced to get rid of the brown horse, and to this day, Ly doesn't know if it was sold for meat or traded for labour. Ly got to keep her white horse after begging her father. Then, one day, Ly was leading her horse to the creek for a drink. The horse's front legs sunk deep into the mud at edge of the creek and in its panic to get out, got its neck tangled in the long grasses growing on the water's edge. The horse began to choke.*

LY: I couldn't help him, so I ran and got my dad. He told me to stay. Don't come. And so I was stay far. I think he knew what happened, so he, he told me to stay. And so, I had to stay in the distance watching. My dad got some people to help him take out the horse, but the horse. As I watch, there's more and more people come. I didn't understand what's going on. And I kept crying and crying. And by the time my dad come home, come to me, he said, "you just have to let go. He's gone. He's dead." And I ask him, why? And He said, "we can't rescue him. He's suffering and he died." And so I allow all these people to come and take the meat, his meat.

VO: *Some days later, Ly was sitting with her family, finishing lunch. Her aunt had joined them for the meal.*

LY: And after we eat, my aunt was next to us. And she said, "so what did you have for lunch?" And I said, my mom make some deer jerky. She laugh. She laugh. And she laugh. And she laugh. I said, why? Why you laugh so much? I never see you just laughing so much. Tell me why.

VO: *Her aunt finally told Ly that it wasn't deer jerky she had eaten for lunch, it was dried meat from her horse.*

LY: And I-I feel sick to my stomach. And I went and puke. I-I hold against my aunt for many years.

VO: *For Ly, the death of her horse was not just the loss of a beloved friend. It represented the true end of her carefree childhood, and all the good memories that came with it, of riding horseback through the hills and fields. These treasured memories were now poisoned with pain and trauma. Meanwhile, her present reality was equally hopeless. Ly couldn't understand why they had left their home behind, and why they were penned up in this refugee camp with nowhere to go, no school, no work, no gardens. Ly fell into a depression and was by turns angry, and bitter. She contemplated suicide.*

[music break]

LY: I guess I was teenager trying to learn to be who I am and understand why my life has been changed so much. And sometime blaming my parents. Why do we end up in this place? I did have a suicide thought that life it was just like this, then [pause] it's not worth living it. I, I complain a lot to God. And I said, Lord, you are God, but why you allow all these things happen and why my life and our life become so poor now, we have nothing, and we had no home, no dream, no place to go. And where is home? What is your purpose of creating us to be like this?

VO: *During these painful days, Ly would sometimes muster the energy to wander around the camp, just for something to do. One day, on one of these walks, she saw a growing crowd of people at a tent near the entrance of the camp.*

LY: So I went in and I saw some white people who are handling stuff to people and I got pretty exciting. So I pushed myself in, got in line.

VO: *When she got to the front of the line, Ly was handed something that would change her life forever. It was a soft, rectangular cloth bag exactly 11" wide by 16" long. It was made from a navy blue patterned fabric and it had a frilly heart stitched onto the front.*

LY: To me is beautiful. And I go, I haven't seen anything like that. It just, it just really beautiful to me. I got really exciting and I thought, wow, this is so beautiful. The heart shape immediately caught my attention. And then I suddenly the Bible, John 3:16 for God so loved the world that he gave and his only son and whoever believe him and receive him shall have eternal life. And that came back to me. I said, I forgot too. This is used to be my favorite Bible verses. And I remember it all suddenly just appear.

[music start]

LY: And then when I opened, inside, I saw the notebooks and I saw a pen and pencils and I was quite happy. And so I start to, um I start to write things that I remember, like song and the three John 3:16 and other, among other things into the notebook. And as I start to keep writing like that, the people in the refugee saw me. And so they said, oh, so you know how to read and write? And I said, yes, I do. And so they will ask me to write a letters. Can you write me a letter to my sister, to my aunt, to my uncle and to my children and blah, blah, blah. And so I keep writing and...[audio fades]

VO: *Ly was writing so many letters that she was running out of pages. So she took her ruler and drew in extra lines between the lines on the page and wrote in tiny lettering to maximize the space on the page.*

LY: Most of the other, the other Hmong people who have a long story, I had to tell their long story about the life, what happened to my child, what happened to this. And so now we live in here and we need money. And sometimes some of that story takes so long and take a couple page. And by time finished, my finger will go, you shouldn't, that red mark it is hurt. And so I start to get mad and I said, I want-I don't want to do this anymore. I want to refuse these people.

VO: *But Ly persevered and continued writing. However, more pressing matters soon took over as her family was sponsored to come to Canada and a new and exciting life awaited her. She did recall putting her most valuable possessions in the school kit bag: her hair clip, her comb. But after she arrived in Canada, she completely forgot about it.*

[music break]

LY: I think it was maybe about 18 years later. So I took the youth to go and do packing at MCC 50 Kent.

VO: *As you may or may not know, 'kit-packing' as it's called, is a great activity for community volunteer groups to come together and pack relief supplies to be shipped to those in need. Most times, these groups have fundraised for or purchased the relief supplies themselves. Under the guidance of Material Resources staff and volunteers, folks get a real hands-on experience of being a part of something special. MCC sends all kinds of kits - sewing kits, hygiene kits, relief kits - but the one that Ly and her youth group were packing that night were school kits. Exactly like the one Ly had received nearly two decades earlier. Ly was stunned, her memories came flooding back.*

[music break]

LY: And when we pack those bag I remember, just like I remembered John 3:16, that I've totally forgot it and now, it came back. And so I thought, wow, could it really be possible. I remember I had something like this. And so I told my husband, and as soon as we'd get home, I went and search from the basement to the top. And I finally found it. And I just took that time wanting to prove to myself that this is not just a memory or, you know, a Déjà vu thinking. I want to prove to myself that this is reality, that I do have a bag that like this.

[music fade then returns]

VO: *When Ly and her family were resettled in Canada, she wanted to focus on her new life, a safe, prosperous future with her family. She was determined to leave her past behind and refused to talk about it for years afterward. The farms, the creeks, the valleys, and hills, her horse. It was too painful. But rediscovering her school kit bag unlocked something in her.*

LY: *When this came back, I start to thinking as, and this is a good memory. This is my life. This is who I am and I should share. And not only to keep it to myself, but to everyone who's around me, including my children and to the, a teenager that I lead now at church. And so that's when I began to open and share my story of the school kit.*

[music end]

VO: *There were other ways in which Ly could start to heal from painful memories. One morning, years after she had started a new life in Canada, she was visited by a ghost from her past.*

LY: *In the morning, I have a dream that my horse came and it was bright in the morning. And my horse came and he spoke to me and said "Ly wake up, wake up". And I woke up and he said, "I'm here. Jump on me." I jumped on his back and he took me for a ride. He ran and I felt the winds and the beauty of the grass. He took me to a place, it was so peaceful. That is all green grass, a valley of full on grass, and then trees and beauty. He told me that I'm at peace, I'm at a good place and you don't need to worry about me and you should be happy. And he said, "from now on, be happy, because I'm happy." My tears was not sorrow but it good memory of my childhood.*

[SFX/music and stream gurgling]

LY: *These bag actually really changed my life, because I remember I was just thinking that I'd rather die as having this life in refugee camp, where there is no school. There is no hope. There's no dream. You can do nothing like that. And, and what is life for? What's the meaning of life? That's what the question I have constantly as God in, when I got that bag, I totally, it changed me from wanting to die into wanting to live and I start to feel like alive again and useful again. I start to say to myself that be joyful live day by day, a better day is yet to come. And so my better day did come. I did come to Canada and have a new life.*

[music break and fade]

VO: *In an upcoming episode of Undercurrents, we'll hear how a woman and her family were saved through miracles, not supernatural ones, but simple and holy acts by strangers that had profound and lasting effects on her and her family. I think this theme applies in this story, too. The comforters and kit bags, made from donated fabric, are not by themselves, miraculous. But when thousands of volunteers team up to create tens of thousands of comforters and school kit bags, year after year, decade after decade - that is a kind of miracle. The volunteers will likely never know the family or individual they're sending it to, but trust that it will reach who it needs to reach. They trust that the love they put into each stitch would be felt, no matter how far it had to go.*

We've heard from Ly Vang how miraculous that school kit bag was in her life... and she's just one out of hundreds of thousands who have received these gifts over the years. If you're interested in volunteering with Material Resources, reach out to your local MCC office, they would love to get you involved.

[music break]

I want to thank Ly Vang for sharing her story with me, and with many others over the years as she's embraced all of her life, her past and present. I want to thank Jon Lebold and all the other Material Resources coordinators across Canada and the US for their work. And of course I want to thank Lori Koch and the thousands of other volunteers who stitch by stitch, give their best for those who need it the most.

This episode was produced with help from Christen Kong. Original and theme music by Brian MacMillan, artwork by Jesse Bergen, and mixed by Francois Goudreault. Huge thanks again to our sponsor and community partner, Kindred Credit Union. If you have any questions or comments about this episode, please write to us at podcast@mcco.ca - I'd love to hear from you. Finally, I would like to thank you for listening to Undercurrents. Please subscribe, rate, and review wherever you listen to podcasts. I'm Ken Ogasawara. Have a great rest of your day.