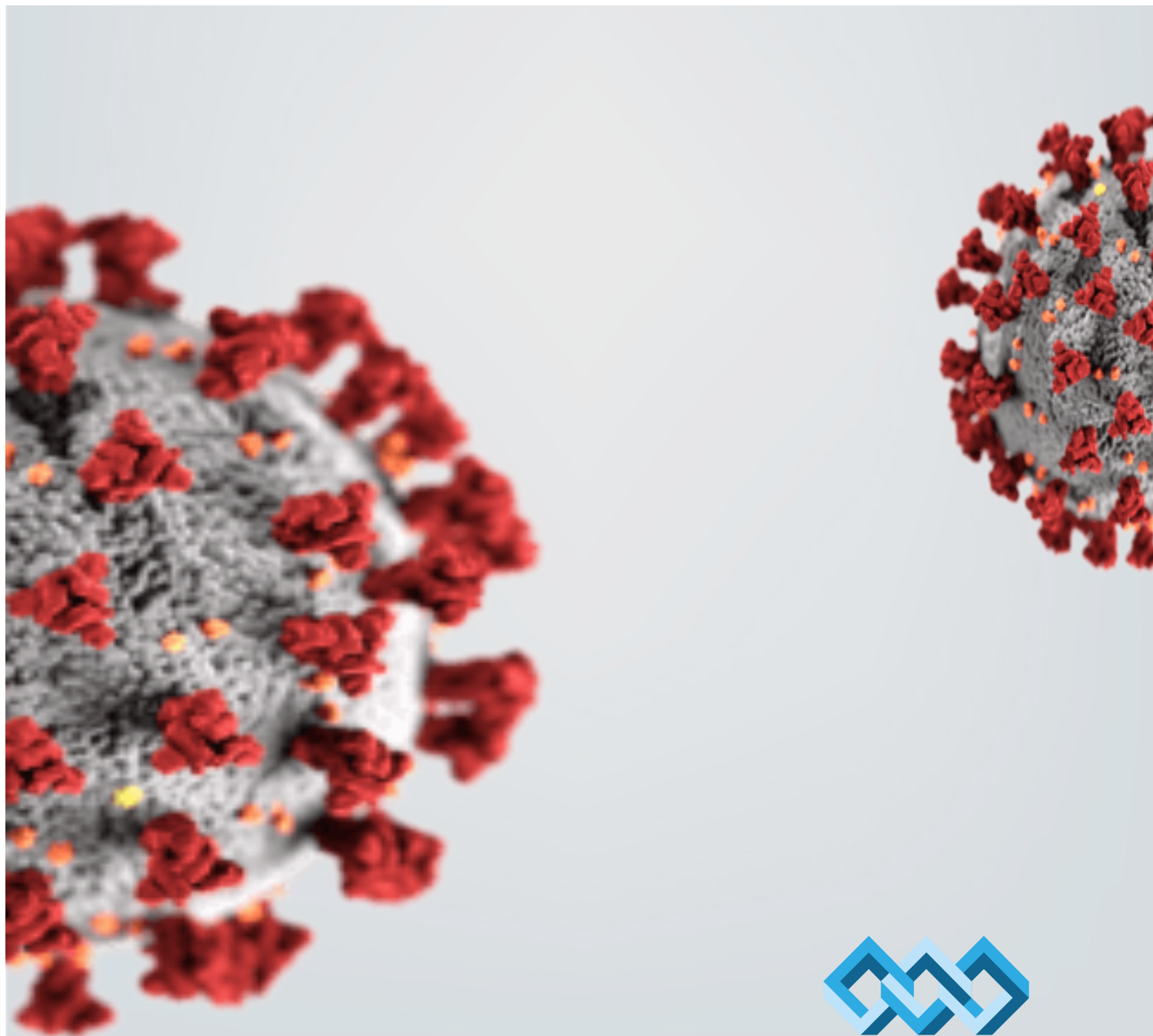


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PhiLab

Réseau Canadien de recherche partenariale sur la philanthropie
Canadian Philanthropy Partnership Research Network

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À propos du PhiLab | About PhiLab

Le Réseau canadien de recherche partenariale sur la philanthropie (PhiLab), anciennement Laboratoire montréalais de recherche sur la philanthropie canadienne, a été pensé en 2014 dans le cadre de la conception de la demande de financement du projet développement de partenariat CRSH intitulé “Innovation sociale, changement sociétal et Fondations subventionnaires canadiennes”. Ce financement a été reconduit en 2018 sous le nom “Evaluation du rôle et des actions de fondations subventionnaires canadiennes en réponse à l’enjeu des inégalités sociales et des défis environnementaux”. Depuis ses débuts, le Réseau constitue un lieu de recherche, de partage d’information et de mobilisation des connaissances des fondations canadiennes. Des recherches conduites en partenariat permettent la coproduction de nouvelles connaissances dédiées à une diversité d’acteurs : des représentants gouvernementaux, des chercheurs universitaires, des représentants du secteur philanthropique et leurs organisations affiliées ou partenaires.

Le Réseau regroupe des chercheurs, des décideurs et des membres de la communauté philanthropique à travers le monde afin de partager des informations, des ressources et des idées.

The Canadian network of partnership-oriented research on philanthropy (PhiLab), previously called the Montreal Research Laboratory on Canadian philanthropy, was thought up in 2014 as part of the conception of a funding request by the NRCC partnership development project called “Social innovation, social change, and Canadian Grantmaking Foundations”. From its beginning, the Network was a place for research, information exchange and mobilization of Canadian foundations’ knowledge. Research conducted in partnership allows for the co-production of new knowledge dedicated to a diversity of actors: government representatives, university researchers, representatives of the philanthropic sector and their affiliate organizations or partners.

The Network brings together researchers, decision-makers and members of the philanthropic community from around the world in order to share information, resources, and ideas.

Prochaine publication

Next publication

Volume #2 en juin 2020 / June 2020

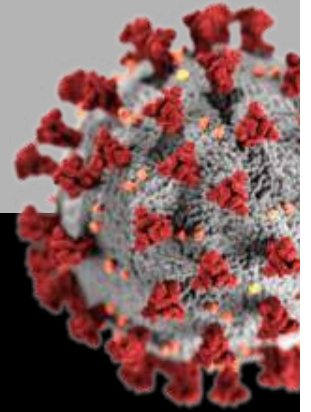


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ENTREVUE | INTERVIEW



Vous trouverez dans ce chapitre
6 entrevues d'étudiants-es du
PhiLab.

In this chapter you will find 6
interviews by our PhiLab
students.



INTERVIEW

Jessica Cytryn and Rachel Cheng of the Montreal Restaurant Workers Relief Fund



Par | By:
Katherine Mac Donald
 Co-coordinator of the PhiLab Network

Jessica Cytryn is a student-at-law at McCarthy Tétrault LLP and a recent graduate of McGill University's Faculty of Law. She founded Canada's first student-led Food Law Society, serves on the operational board of the Canadian Association for Food Law and Policy, and is the President of the Montreal Restaurant Workers Relief Fund.

Rachel Cheng works with various food nonprofits to build a future where sustainable food is accessible to all. She coordinates communications and campaigns at Food Secure Canada, plans events to strengthen local food systems with other groups, and serves as the secretary on the board of the Montreal Restaurant Workers Relief Fund.

Katherine Mac Donald began working with PhiLab as a research assistant, translating various documents, including blog articles, research summaries and newsletters. After a year as the Communications Manager, she is now, the Co-Coordinator of the Network. This entails managing the members and partners, website, social media platforms, the monthly newsletter and many overarching coordination tasks

“According to Restaurants Canada, the pandemic has cost 800 000 Canadian restaurant workers their jobs”

Katherine MacDonald (KM) : What motivated you to launch the Montreal Restaurant Workers Relief Fund (MRWRF)?

Jessica Cytryn (JC) : We realized that restaurant workers were particularly hard hit by the COVID-19 crisis. From one day to the next, most of them found themselves jobless, and didn't know when they would be able to work again. According to Restaurants Canada, the pandemic has cost 800 000 Canadian restaurant workers their jobs, so the sheer number of people affected in the industry was a motivator. Restaurant workers are also very vulnerable because many of them rely on cash tips. In the beginning, when restaurants started closing their dining rooms, the sense of urgency was that many restaurant workers (waiters, busboys and hostesses for example) were relying on going home that weekend with cash in their pockets, but that never happened. That was the initial push. Then, there is also the fact that the industry has workers who are not eligible for the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) or other government benefits, because they are undocumented, working part-time, or international students. We were quick in identifying a need and acting on it.

KM : What tools or resources were most helpful and what were the biggest obstacles for you and your team ?

JC : The best resources we had were the people who got involved. They helped on two fronts: through knowledge, resource sharing and pure manpower. The most helpful people we had, at least for me, were the two women running MTL Rapid Response.

We had a long phone conversation about their structure, which is very similar to ours at MRWRF. Essentially, they are collecting donations from the public and dispersing it to applicants, according to their self-identified needs. Their applicants are mostly sex workers, who are evidently not eligible for government funds. The input of these two women was crucial to launching the fund. They gave us advice on aspects such as accounting, e-transfers and documenting the transfers. Overall, the people who got involved really were our best resource as they helped with everything we didn't know how to do, such as our website, social media, accounting, graphic design, etc.

The biggest obstacles we faced were around how to receive and disburse funds. At first, none of us had any idea how to distribute tens of thousands of dollars to individuals. There are not many organizations that send direct e-transfers to people. If there had been a tool that could have facilitated the process for us, that would have been the most useful resource. Another obstacle was an issue we faced with many of the financial institutions we had to deal with, such as GoFundMe. The account vetting process was very long, and they held the money we raised for an extended period of time. This wasn't necessarily particular to Gofundme, but a problem we also faced with PayPal and banks. Due to the pandemic, no one was operating under normal circumstances. It was very difficult to get someone on the phone to help us with the problems we were facing. We would be waiting for hours on hold, and that is if the company's help centre was even open. Banking limitations represented another hurdle: banks freezing funds and having e-transfer limits. Of course, you have to wait another two hours on hold to speak to someone about it. One issue that has only come up in the past ten days or so, stems from the fact that we threw all this together so quickly, are acting with a sense of urgency, and are not an established organization.

We don't really have a fixed structure to deal with human resources, ethics or operations. For example, one question we've been asking ourselves is, while our main goal is to raise as much funds as possible and distribute them to our applicants, are there circumstances under which we feel we should not accept a contribution from someone? Be it financial resources, services or partnerships of any kind, if we feel that that person, or company, has acted in an immoral way in the past, how should we face the situation? There have been two instances where we just didn't know what to do, and are still struggling to handle it. How do we deal with these ethical and moral dilemmas? This is something we have found very challenging. We have been trying to answer these questions internally and establish an ethics code to help handle these situations moving forward.

“The biggest obstacles we faced were around how to receive and disburse funds.”

KM : Is there anything you feel is lacking or could be improved in the Canadian philanthropic sector to better face situations like those we are living amidst the current pandemic ?

Rachel Cheng (RC) : What I've learnt working with this fund is that it is possible to start and operationalize a fund within a month. In my experience, things are rarely that fast in the philanthropic or nonprofit sector. Communities know who needs help the most and know how to reach them, and this is an amazing example of the restaurant worker community identifying a need and responding quickly. My hope is that coming out of this, the philanthropic sector can empower more communities to respond in similar ways. It could also be interesting for the philanthropic sector to document how other organizations like ours have been disbursing funds in an emergency situation, as lessons learned for next time. Comparing different initiatives, especially with those in the United States, could lead to the creation of an interesting tool.

This has also been an opportunity to foster community resilience. The MRWRF has allowed leaders in the restaurant industry to develop important skills, including: partnership development and community

granting. As a primarily for-profit industry, this could be a vital component to helping workers weather crises. The capacity-building we are witnessing really is incredible.

Another element I think the philanthropic and nonprofit sector can reevaluate is timeliness in disbursing funds during a crisis. Under normal circumstances, applying for funding, whether as an organization or individual, can take months. The application forms may be long, creating another barrier for those with varying levels of literacy. Covid-19 has shown that it's possible to shorten application processes to help where it matters most.

“It might sound cliché, but I had completely underestimated how generous people can be.”

Another way the philanthropic sector could support initiatives such as ours is to share their wealth of experience and skills. This could be in the form of a toolkit, kind of like a 101 on responding to community needs, with templates and resources. Or it could be having staff available to mentor community initiatives as they start.

Another obstacle is that many grants are project-based. I am very thankful that the Montreal Restaurant Worker Relief Fund works with private donations, giving us enormous flexibility about what we can do with the funds. If we were to apply for a grant, it might have to be for a specific project, not individual aid, so we wouldn't have that flexibility and agility to respond. Revisiting flexibility among funding is something else I would encourage the sector to look at.

JC : Definitely flexibility. I cannot imagine how difficult this would be if we did not have flexibility regarding the use of funds. The applicants know their own needs. We see it in the application forms and through our email exchanges. The current pandemic situation is changing on a daily basis. If we had to explain the changes we've had to make to adapt to the changing reality, and their

effects on our funds and our applicants to a third party in order to get and justify receiving money, it would be extremely time-consuming. Having to translate everything from English to French is already slowing us down. I can't imagine how difficult it would be to have everything vetted by a third party. On that note, translation services for community projects would be great. Given that we have a mix of francophone and anglophone applicants, we need to have everything translated, which has been slowing us down but, what can you do?

RC : Basically it would be about thinking of everything you do as a funder and how to offer that as a resource to a smaller nonprofit or community initiative. I think that is a tangible way to empower communities and build resilience instead of dependence. Instead of only funding people, invest in training people, so they can do it themselves in their community. In emergency situations, you have to respond quickly, and a lot of community organizers might not know how to look for these resources. Reaching out to emerging initiatives to offer assistance could become a vital role for foundations to play in building community resilience.

KM : Through your own experience, what is the most important lesson you have learned so far about grassroots philanthropic initiatives?

JC : It might sound cliché, but I had completely underestimated how generous people can be. I am blown away by how much people have given to the fund. Not only through donations, but also the people in the community who have donated their time and skills in order to generate more funds and help more people. It is inspiring.

In terms of fundraising, the trick was figuring out how to reach people in the first place. I have learned that an incredible amount of effort is put into reaching out to donors and applicants: building a website, having everything translated, answering emails, managing social media, etc. I have learned so much on all that goes into running a grassroots initiative.

RC : What really strikes me is how quickly and efficiently a group can respond. If someone had asked me: "Can you raise \$100 000 in one month and distribute it to hundreds of people, communicating in both English and French, in a way that is timely?" I would have said that it was impossible, especially when the entire planet is on

pause because of a global pandemic! What we accomplished collectively here is really remarkable. It has shown me that when you respond to a real need in a community, and you communicate it in an effective way, it will resonate because people already understand that need. You make it possible for them to either contribute or get the help they need. This project has been such a great example of all those things coming together so perfectly.

JC : Exactly. I remember a moment when we had just started the project. We were maybe three hours in. It was just Kaitlin and I, and I remember her saying: “I think I’m going to message this great graphic designer and ask them to make me a logo.” An hour later, we had a logo. That was when I realized that things were going to be moving very quickly.

KM : How do you think the context of the COVID-19 pandemic had an impact on your experience ?

RC : I want to highlight just how precarious restaurant workers are in normal circumstances. With Covid-19 it is no longer a hidden reality of people living paycheck to paycheck, unable to save money even with two or three jobs and being very close to food insecurity. The crisis is not exactly the great equalizer, because it affects vulnerable groups disproportionately. I think the COVID-19 crisis has brought this reality much closer to home.



JC : I don’t even know where to begin. The sense of urgency brought on by the crisis has affected every aspect of this initiative. The initiative wouldn’t even exist without it. Every aspect of our operations has been affected. The amount of money we have been able to raise and the general success of the organization is because everybody understands. Everyone is affected. Everyone knows a restaurant worker who was affected by the quarantine. We suddenly find ourselves all in the same boat, in one way or another, and cannot ignore it as easily. In this case, it has led to the demonstration of community solidarity we have witnessed at the Montreal Restaurant Workers Relief Fund. ■

“What really strikes me is how quickly and efficiently a group can respond (...) What we accomplished collectively here is really remarkable.”