

# My Life as a Sauvé Scholar

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## Arrival

### ***Settling Down***

I still remember when I tell my parents that I was going to the Philippines in 2007, my Mom said, “Go to America, the Philippines is not good!” I wasn’t sure on what basis she said it. But my Dad responded mom’s comment, “What do you know about America? It is far. Philippines is a lot closer to us. Good, my dear. Go to the Philippines”. And again, last year when I told them that I was selected for a program in Canada, my Mom was very happy that I was going to America, but not to the US, to Canada but still in North America.

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When I stepped into Sauvé House where I would be residing for the whole eight months program, I was really excited. The house looked amazing, gigantic, and very fancy. Marie Marguerite, who was the then program coordinator, brought me to my room. The room was very spacious with queen size bed, and private bathroom attached. After all the struggles for Canada visa issues, I finally made it!

For the first few days after I arrived in Sauvé House, there were only two persons in the four-storied gigantic house (Secret: I even sometimes got lost!); Giovanni Gabassi from Italy and ME from a country called Burma. As far as I know, I am the one and only one Burmese scholar the Sauve Scholars Program has ever received. I was very lucky.

### ***The City***

After Marie Marguerite picked me up from the Montreal Airport, she drove through the city along St. Catherine Street. As we entered the center of the city, she said, “This is the downtown where you will have to come very often”.

**Then I thought, there must be an important event happening in town where people of the town gathered together, and I asked her.**

**She said, “No! Why?”**

**And I said, “Oh then, where are the people?”**

**“That’s it!” said she.**

**“OH MY GOD!”**

**Coming from Bangkok, Thailand before I came to Montreal, I find Montreal very spacious. Everywhere I go, there is so much space, unlike Bangkok which is usually very crowded, heavy traffic, hot and humid, so and so. Montreal is a beautiful city with friendly people. There are two divisions in town; Francophone: French part (east) and Anglophone: English part (West). Luckily, Sauvé House and McGill University both situated in the English part of the town. My French language skill is “zero”!**

**Although my French is very poor, I like hanging out on St. Laurent, St. Denis, and St. Urbain. Those are the streets in the east (francophone) part of the town. I love shopping on those areas because I can find local products from small local businesses.**

### ***The Weather***

**My friends back home will laugh at me if I say, “Canada’s weather is no difference than ours” They will laugh at me. But ONLY in the summer! I left all my sandals because I thought they would be useless in Canada’s weather. However, I was lucky enough to be introduced to the nicest time of the year, summer. I find the life style in Canada very different than ours. People usually go up to the mountain, chill out, get the sunshine, with little dogs, no cheesy picture taking, and I find it very relaxing.**

### ***McGill University***

**The first day when I entered McGill University, I feel so proud of myself to be part of one of the renowned Universities in the world. The first thing I did was exploring the McGill University Library and start reading Burma related books which are banned in Burma.**

**Attending the courses at McGill was also very nice. I took some political sciences courses, gender development, communications, public relations, social science subjects. I mostly find useful to attend the evening continuing education classes because the students in those classes come from professional setting such as employees from big Canadian companies; Scotia Bank, Aldo shoes, CBC, etc.**

## **Overall Experience**

**The beginning of the Sauvé Scholars Program was started with “Canoe Trip” where all the twelve scholars got a chance to get together deeply in the nature. Being away from all the technology that we are used to made the trip more intimidating. It was a real Canadian Adventure. It turned out that Sergay Tantushyan, a young MBA and an economist from Armenia was very inspired by the experience. In fact, he was the one who commented on the trip before we got started, “I can’t understand why people go into jungle for relaxing time!”**

**I spent the first few weeks settling down, adjusting and integrating into the society as well as to the program and exploring Montreal and McGill. The most fun and challenging part was staying with a bunch of diverse international young people.**

**The best thing I like about Sauvé Program is that, unlike other fellowship programs, it brings in people from both North and South together providing same opportunities and provisions. The program is not only about leadership, it is also about equality, all scholars, either they come from rich countries or poor countries, they are all the same under the umbrella of Sauvé Program. Being in Montreal which is very metropolitan city with all those diverse scholars with different backgrounds and professionals was also the best part.**

**Throughout September, all the scholars had to present their own countries with their national cuisine. I would also title the Sauvé Program as “Sauvé International Food Program”! As diverse as the group is, so is the food. The professional looking kitchen is tempting us to cook. Later on, the scholars spend most of their time in the Sauvé kitchen sharing information, food, life and experiences.**

**Program planned excursion trips such as visit to Canadian Parliament in Ottawa, experience Quebec City arranged by Guillaume Lavoie, trips within Montreal such as apple picking, occasional winter sports are all very new experiences for me. I felt sad that I couldn’t join the trips to the US Obama campaign in New Hampshire and Obama Inauguration in D.C, visiting high school in Vermont and so on. I also enjoyed the scholar planned trips such as Cabana Sucre and Niagara Falls adventure. The program should plan more group trips beginning of the program so that the bonding activities happen at the very early stage of the relationship among the scholars.**

**One remarkable experience was about enjoying the Canadian Winter. It was the first time for me to experience the very cold weather as low as minus 40 degrees. Often I talk to people home, and they have no idea of what I was saying. They just said, “You won’t survive!” I enjoyed ice-skating for the first time. Sonny took us to the ice-hockey game, Guillaume to dog sledding, ice fishing, burgeoning, and all winter related activities, I loved them!**

**The most valuable thing I found was the internet access. In Burma, whenever we tend to open a website, there will be a RED line which says: “ACCESS HAS BEEN DENIED”. Since I arrived in Montreal, I have been exploring the web as much as I could and reading online resources which are not available in Burma.**

**I also find very intriguing to attend the conferences, events and speakers in house. Inviting guests to Sauve House for tea time also makes the discussion with the speakers informal and I find myself very involved in informal interactions.**

## **Achievements**

**Sauve year has been given me time, resources, and networking opportunities to think about where I am in life and where I want myself to be in life. When I applied for Sauve Program, I set three goals to be achieved: to network with the scholars on the program, to network with the Canadian organizations and institutions, to work on the proposed project.**

**After the exchange program in the Philippines where I had to share the apartment with another participant from South Africa, Sauvé Program experience has been like a test for my interpersonal skills. Cross-cultural living experience was a real value throughout the program including understanding each others' cultures and traditions, giving personal space where needed and respecting each other.**

**Personal networking with the scholars around the world was definitely an asset especially the program is aimed at the future potential leaders. I will definitely be using the pool of human resources for my future works and cooperation. When I was in Burma, I always had a feeling very distanced to the westerners, whether they are tourists or foreign aid workers or English teachers because I felt they were always higher than us. However in Sauve Program, I feel very proud of myself being under the same level whether they are Asians or English or Burmese or Canadians, whether they graduated from Oxford or Cambridge or Harvard or Dagon (a university in Burma). We are all equally treated. I felt that Sauve Program really is a program of EQUALITY as well as REALITY.**

**Learning about the issues around the world through the co-fellows and the Montreal community through events, conferences and speaker series were very useful for me, especially because I come from a very isolated country. I feel encouraged when I hear from the scholars about the challenges their countries and regions are facing because in Burma, people feel very discouraged that we are the only one suffering without being aware of others'.**

**Interacting with the community in Canada has been a great experience. I really think working together with Paul Shore; a Sauvé alumnus, was a great help for me to identify my interest in media and documentary production. He has been an incredible supporter of me and my work for the future. At the same level, I met Mila Aung Thwin from Eyesteelfilm which is one of the best documentary production companies in Canada. Mila and I found a common ground which is to work something for home – as he turns out to be a Canadian-Burmese. Although I just met him a few months before the program ends, he and the company will be a huge help for my works in the future years to come. It has also been invaluable to have met some of the people from Montreal based international organizations such as Rights and Democracy, Equitas, Reporters without Borders, etc.**

## Collective Effort

All scholars agreed to work with the first nation issue in Canada. Despite its high level of democracy and freedom, Canada is notorious about treating badly to its own indigenous communities. I was so excited to work on that issue especially because I worked closely with the indigenous peoples in the Philippines last year for my projects. Luckily, Ann Macaulay, who is Clarice's mentor, has been working with Kahnawake first nation community for a long time as family physician. She came to Sauvé House and talked extensively about her experiences and first nations issue in Canada as a whole.

The group also decided that we will not go into the community and impose things on the community. Rather, we agreed that we will ask the community what and how they expect us to work with them.

It was very nice being invited to a couple of the social events in the community. They dance beautifully, and speak their Mohawk language. People of the community welcomed us very warmly and we were also allowed to participate in dancing with them.

The big day of our collective project was about a full day workshop with high school students from the Kahnawake Survival School where the students are taught their Mohawk language, culture, arts and traditions. It was very interesting to see how students interact with the scholars. They were really keen to learn about each and every country and the issues of the countries that were representing. Liz and I did a workshop in community organizing and how to identify the issues that are important to the community. We let them identify the issues that they think are very important for them and the community and come up with the posters about the issue identified.

It was an overall very successful work-together because the school requested the Sauve Scholar to come back again to the school and have more works with the grade 10<sup>th</sup> an 11<sup>th</sup> which we didn't get a chance to include in our workshops. It was very positive result that the community which is know to choose to be isolated themselves from other part of the society in Canada, opened up the door for Sauve Program and welcomed us very warmly and willed to work again in the future.

I remember once time, when I was at high school, there were a group of university student from Japan visited our school and talk to us. I barely understood what they were saying because of the language barrier. However, it remained in my memory forever that I saw somebody from other part of the world at that young age. It was just a dream for me to go around the world at young age. However, nothing is impossible in this world nowadays.

## Real Highlights of the Year

- Canoe Trip
- Meeting with the Former President of the United States, Bill Clinton
- Reception with the Deputy Secretary General of the United Nations

- **Hosting of the Professor Jefferey D. Sachs**
- **Meeting Harn Yawngwe, the youngest son of the late President of Burma; Sao Shwe Theik**
- **Cooperation with Eyesteelfilm and Mila Aung-Thwin**
- **Meeting Mika Levesque, Asia Coordinator for Right and Democracy, Montreal**
- **Meeting Elizabeth Miller, a communications studies professor at Concordia University**
- **Meeting a Canadian Family who have great passion about Burma; Honor and Douglas Robertson**
- **Trip to Niagara Falls**
- **Quebec City Trip**
- **Trip to Canadian Parliament in Ottawa**
- **Collective Project**

**“Are you going to stay in Canada after the program?” Whenever people asked me that question, I feel hurt deep in my heart. I always feel there is an underlying meaning in that question. The only person who asked me a direct question was David Kilgour, Ottawa based Human Rights guru. “Do you want to apply for refugee status here? It will take only a few hours. I can help you out”. I don’t know why I felt ashamed of being addressed that question. In fact, it is a fact. Burma is a poor country going through the worst of political crisis, economic instability, and a country of no opportunity. However, I believe people of my tragic country need me. I have a lot of work to do for my country. I believe that the change in Burma is coming very soon. I am definitely going back.**