

Obituary of Yvette Papillon



An industrious woman who gave her life to the healing and teaching of thousands in Chile and Haiti, Yvette Papillon, a nurse, died in Port-au-Prince Sunday morning, November 11, 2018. She was 86 and is survived by a daughter, Fegna Muller, her son Alexandre, and

Madame Papillon was a Canadian expat known to a few Americans and revered by many Canadians who have for years volunteered in Haiti. Her story began in rural Quebec. It starts in the small farming town of Saint Basile (today a community of about twenty four hundred French-speaking residents) west of Quebec City.

Yvette, the oldest of four children was born at home in a modest farmhouse in May of 1932. At the center of town, on the Boulevard du Centenaire, stands the place of her baptism, the Church of Saint Basile. Its charming spire and unabashed mix of several architectural styles speak of an unapologetic and self-reliant populace. And near the square a sign bears the remarkably optimistic town motto which translates roughly in English as "*Believe in the Future.*" Yvette was a living emblem of that motto.

In the grips of a crippling economic depression, Evile and Eugenie Papillon would raise four children, two girls and two boys and probably never imagined the lives their eldest daughter would touch in distant lands as a nurse and humanitarian.

Young Yvette received her nursing training at Universite Laval, Quebec City, the oldest French-speaking university in the Americas. Early on she returned to Quebec for an extra year in specialty training as a nurse-midwife. Her work had revealed the infant mortality crisis throughout much of the underdeveloped world, particularly in rural communities. In the countries she served, physicians were sometimes as far as a day's travel or more from settlements, and hospital facilities were often non-existent or woefully inadequate.

Following nurses' training and licensure, she spent three years in a laboratory at Detroit General Hospital, as part of a team involved in a nation-wide research project on cervical cancer, directed by Doctor Brian Little. Her first posting as a public health nurse clinician was in Santiago, Chile. Here, she worked as a supervisor at the *La Pampa de Coma*, a hospital that served the mining community there.

In Chile, her work expanded exponentially when she became the director of a major clinic initially established by an Oblate missionary. She could now focus on new ways to include nutrition education and supervise vaccination teams in urban slums and impoverished villages. Due to her efforts, thousands of urban poor were enabled to access at least rudimentary health care for the first time in their lives, resisting diseases that plagued their ancestors for generations.

Throughout her long career, events often shaped her life as much as planning. Yvette was drawn to Haiti by the country's great need and by her desire to accomplish a reconnection with the French language in the farthest reaches of French-Canadian culture. She returned often to Canada seeking support for what would become her lay ministry, returning to her new home enlivened and encouraged in her work by the good wishes, prayers and the financial support she received on these trips.

Just as Rachael Carson used her little home in Maine as an instrument—a useful observation post and place to nurture ideas, Madame Yvette used her modest home in Canape Vert as her studio, her laboratory, her classroom and her salon. She introduced her students to volunteers, including horticultural experts from around the globe who came to teach and prove their vegetable gardening ideas in this ravaged land. Her disciples came to share a common purpose of improving the nutrition and health of these Creole people.

On the small patch of yard and on the roof of her home she grew micro-gardens where individual plots as small as one foot square could be planted, watered and cared-for in a way that had surprising yields. Her own incubator garden on the roof of the house was destroyed and strewn on the hillside with the remains of her home that collapsed down the hill in January of 2010. But until that time she maintained her school for gardeners, teaching about the contribution of rabbit feces and cooking ashes, acting along with vegetable compost would work to provide a beneficial soil additive to nurture growing vegetable plants.

After the earthquake, her son and some of her pupils helped me to rebuild. Many of her volunteers and houseguests over the years helped to restock with furniture and kitchen things.

Madame had arrived in Port-au-Prince in 1970. Her training and clinical experience in Latin America prepared her well for her first job the day after her arrival--a public health nursing position as both a clinician and administrator. Her work focused on nutrition, but she also worked as an administrator visiting virtually all of the public health clinics in Haiti overseeing both nurses' training and clinical work. She became particularly interested in controlling 'Kwashiorkor', the Creole name for the last stages of malnutrition in children, usually arresting and stunting their growth, and generally resulting in their death.

Under the general direction of Dr. William Fougere, she served a roving mission in remote towns as "eyes and ears" for larger medical teams. She consulted with medical directors involved in public health throughout all of Haiti, concentrating on the need for large-scale vaccinations and the treatment of tuberculosis and leprosy. Her focus never strayed from her patients and the training and support of their care givers.

Yvette married Pierre Papillon in January, 1971 at a ceremony performed at the Church of Sacre Coeur in Port-au-Prince. She would joke that she and her husband both bore the surname Papillon and were bound to marry to give each other a second set of wings. They both descended from a Frenchman who settled in Haiti centuries ago.

Always resourceful, she reached out to contacts in the Mormon church for materials and equipment to mount an extensive vaccination program in Haiti. After

training a corps of Grade 2 student nurses in Haiti, she enlisted them, along with foreign nurses, mostly volunteers, in a large-scale vaccination program of her own design which had all the earmarks of a crusade. Pulling resources from every available source for the project, she was able to secure refrigeration equipment from the Export/Import Bank, and the Haitian Ministry of Public Health provided both the authorization and the transportation equipment to cover much of the country. Ultimately, the vaccination program would drastically reduce the incidence of tetanus in women and children.

Almost immediately thereafter she turned her attention to the scourge of tuberculosis, particularly among children. Madame encouraged the regular collection and analysis of sputum from patients at the General Hospital in Port-au-Prince, regardless of the reason for treatment or admission. In the childrens' ward, she encouraged the administration of oral penicillin in a two-year regimen for cases even remotely suspect for the disease. Her work with lepers brought her into contact with a Canadian Roman Catholic Cardinal, who had stepped down from his ecclesiastical office to journey to Africa to study successful leprosy treatment there and in Haiti.

Travelling alone by car from a vaccination trip in rural Boit du Bouquet, Haiti, Madame stumbled upon a scene that would add immeasurably to the dimension of her life's work and signify a life-changing moment. She brought her car to a halt on the far side of a bridge over a deep channel, curious to see what was drawing the attention of the large crowd that had gathered there. Looking down she saw a small pack of young, ravenous crocodiles feeding in a kind of frenzy where they would snap and snarl to get exclusive access to the prey, and then, occupied, would be driven off by the others, one of whom would eventually claim the remainder of the meal for itself. But it was not the fight among the alligators that had attracted the crowd, but the meal itself. The animals were devouring the naked corpse of an infant child.

Nauseated, she returned to the car and spent a sleepless night in Canape Vert, pondering the gruesome scene she had witnessed that day. Her mission became clear. She decided to focus any amount of her free time on placement of uncared-for children in the hands of families—mostly Canadians—who would be drawn to adoption through her efforts, whether they had come to Haiti with that in mind or not.

The guest house she ran provided a ready pool of families eager to adopt. The supply of children on the streets of Port-au-Prince seemed endless. She embarked on a mission to find children in need. Their sheer numbers were overwhelming. She would find them, helpless, filthy, and in tattered clothes, or no clothes at all, by the side of the coast highway, or on a narrow lane ascending into the mountains. Often no parent or guardian would not appear and the child was not claimed even by a sibling who might emerge from a hut. She would call out since an onlooker might be a relative scavenging in one of the many piles of trash, burning in the night, slowly devoured by a listless fire. Yvette would pull her car to the side, and walk or carry the child while making diligent inquiries to determine that he or she had indeed been abandoned. Only upon confirmation of each child's orphan status—but sometimes answering a mother's plea that the child be taken, fed and shown a better life--she would ask a toddler to join her, or carry a helpless infant to her home.

Of course, when it became known that Yvette's house could become a portal to a better life for a child, she would find swaddled infants on the doorstep in the morning or tendered from the arms of a supplicant mother begging—not for alms for her family, but to surrender a child to a stranger known for her benevolence. Volunteers arrived to share their skills, many of them staying in the guest house she developed next to her home. Often, they would leave Haiti with an infant to nurture at home. Estimates range that more than a thousand did so.

And when the burden became too great so as to limit her other work and provide at least an hour of sleep at night, first Madame partnered with the government Ministry of Health and ultimately relinquished her sole responsibility to the Ministry to enable procedures to be established to facilitate the work she began.

The fruits of Madame's efforts are illustrated by the biography of a prominent and highly successful Haitian-born attorney living and practicing in Quebec. Known for both his legal skills and wise contributions through advisory positions on professional and governmental boards. Madame had rescued him as an infant, kicking the rat that was eating away at his ear while the child screamed, terrified and defenseless at less than a month old. He was found near a doorway on a one of those busy narrow lanes that descend down from the foothills. Madame nursed the baby back to health and found him to be robust and more than resilient despite the fact that his left ear had been partially devoured. Luckily for him, he was soon adopted by a Canadian family who raised him, sending him to the best schools and universities.

In the mid-1980s Madam became increasingly involved in agronomy as a way of improving the health of her neighbors. She began to collaborate with a husband and wife who lived temporarily in Haiti. They were avid gardeners Patrick and Connie Lahr. The couple worked side-by-side with Yvette and collaborating with a Canadian garden club to refine their techniques to the conditions and demands of the tropics.

Her own home became a center of learning and demonstration for micro-vegetable gardening, some of which took place on the roof. Plantings continued on the grounds along with the raising of rabbits which were used for three purposes in her multi-tasking: the animals provided a learning experience in animal husbandry for local student agronomists; their excrement was demonstrated to be a plentiful and effective plant nutrient along with ash from the charcoal used for cooking in the homes of most Haitian families; and a pair could be sold for \$20. This was good money in a poor economy to boost a family budget.

When asked about who or what might have provided the inspiration for her life's work, Madame Yvette's face takes on a look somewhere between surprise and mild humor, answering:

“Do you think with children starving to death, and parents inflicted with diseases we know how to treat, that a person needs any other inspiration than seeing that to roll up her sleeves?”

Almost to the end of her life, she would still instruct, but having broken a hip and increasingly frail, that instruction was largely through her students and less hands on. Her work is carried on by those she trained who would go on to develop the flourishing model gardens at the Grace International school and girls' orphanage at Lamentin, in Carrefour--gardens which now substantially feed the girls in the orphanage there, as well as the staff. Her students bring home to their children and their villages the lessons learned from the irrepressible nurse from Quebec. In the long twilight, they can see the bounty her teaching has brought to the colorful riot of vegetables in their back yards and community gardens and almost see her there, bending low in her floral housedress and sandals, tending the rows.

