

A Day with Madame Vanier

CARMEN COUILLARD BJERRE, PHD

I first met the Vaniers in Paris in the summer of 1951, when General Georges was Canada's ambassador to France. My brother Louis Couillard was posted in Paris and, with his fiancée Yvonne d'Anjou, had developed a warm attachment to the Vaniers, who attended their wedding that autumn. Upon returning to Ottawa, they happily renewed links with the Vaniers, by then at Rideau Hall, and I was graciously included in a cozy luncheon there. In subsequent years, my sister-in-law became seriously ill and was very touched and cheered by Madame Vanier's monthly gift of flowers.

After General Vanier's death, Madame Vanier settled in Montreal. In the early summer of 1970, she contacted me about an invitation she had received to speak about the Vanier Institute at a luncheon meeting of a women's cultural group in Granby. She asked if I, as a current member of the Board, could speak about the Institute on her behalf. I agreed and, on the appointed day, picked her up at her home on Redpath Crescent, where I met her son Jean.

It was a lovely day as we drove to Granby and chatted about many things, almost as old friends. It was very special for me to spend most of that day in Madame Vanier's congenial company. She spoke as a loving mother of her five adult children and was a warm, charming and generous person – diffident and even shy in some respects. She confided that she was uncomfortable with public speaking and, with endearing candour, said, "Vous savez, ma chère, je ne possède aucun diplôme!"

Arriving in Granby, we were welcomed with open arms by the ladies, and in that closer, face-to-face encounter, Madame Vanier shone with her natural, convivial human touch. Lunch was delightful and animated, and my presentation on the Institute's work evoked much interest.

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The members of the cultural group presented us with identical gifts: a lovely, handmade (by an artist member) metal figurine of a gardener – a special memento I cherish to this day.

Before leaving Granby, Madame Vanier – with her typical family-centred kind-heartedness, had arranged to meet the family of a young missionary whom she had known in Paris. The family was overjoyed to welcome us and we had a very warm and cozy visit.

I hold very fond memories of this special day in the company of this "grande dame." It was a perfect day... also much enjoyed by my dear aunt, who happily entertained my one-year-old daughter at home. ♥

Dr. Carmen Couillard Bjerre is a long-time supporter of the Vanier Institute, beginning with service (1962-1963) on the committee charged with preparing the list of invitees to the original Canadian Conference on the Family in 1964 – a historic event that led to the creation of the Vanier Institute. She served on the board from 1968 to 1974 and she is currently a member of the Vanier Alumni Network. She has been on the faculty of University of Ottawa, Carleton University, Université de Montréal and McGill University, and she worked closely with children and families for many years until her retirement from the Montreal Children's Hospital.

