

L'Arche is a place where you start to unknow what you've learned in society

Some things in life are predestined, others are accidental.

Michael McDonald, an author and filmmaker, has lived in – and documented – life in L'Arche communities around the world, and he has had a mixture of both on the journey.

He fell into filmmaking by accident through L'Arche, a network of 131 communities worldwide in which people with and without developmental disabilities live, work and share their lives together.



McDonald (right) met Jean Vanier (left) for the first time in Washington D.C in 2007. Supplied

For more than a decade, McDonald has lived in L'Arche communities from Kenya to France – where it was founded by the Catholic theologian and humanitarian Jean Vanier in 1964. In that time, he has made lifelong friends and learned a lot about his own humanity.

“The L'Arche mission isn't about disability. The L'Arche mission is about relationship,” McDonald explained. “People with disabilities, across all cultures, are among the most crushed and pushed down wherever you go, and I can say that because I've been to the six continents and interviewed people.”

McDonald has told their stories through *As I Am*, a L'Arche International video series that looks at 12 L'Arche residents. The 31-year-old filmmaker shared some of his experiences at a Feb. 6th fundraiser for the Edmonton chapter, and

at St. Francis Xavier and St. Thomas More schools.

“It’s a place where you go to start to unknow what you’ve learned in society,” McDonald said. “What you do might not be that important. Who you are, kindness, these things are really valuable. But also guts. It does take a lot of guts to be doing things in a way that is so counter-cultural.”

Growing up in South Bend, Indiana, McDonald had a personal experience as a child that shattered his own preconceived notions of disability. That moment came in 1999 when he was in Grade 4 and had to volunteer in the community as part of his Catholic school curriculum.

His dad Fran chose the Logan Center, which provides services for people with intellectual disabilities.



L'Arche member Jean Marc shares a moment with Michael McDonald at La Forestiere in France. Supplied

“When I got there, there was a woman waiting for me. She said, ‘Michael, you’re going to spend the day with a woman named Claire and she’s going to be very different than most adults that you’ve met. She doesn’t walk with her legs. And when you speak to her and she speaks to you, you probably won’t understand what she’s saying.’”

“After the day I ended, I got in the car, looked up at my dad and said, ‘I’m not going back.’”

McDonald was “scared off,” unsure what to make of Claire, a woman in her 30s.

“That word ‘weird’ was a big word. I felt confused,” he recalled. “My dad said words that I’ve never forgotten. He said, ‘OK Michael, you can keep going back until it no longer feels weird.’”

“Later he told me, ‘You thought it felt weird because you thought your humanity and her humanity were different. But I knew if you kept going, she would teach you otherwise.’ And she did.”

Little did McDonald know it would set him on a path for his life and career in L’Arche.

At Notre Dame, McDonald studied the writings of L’Arche founder Jean Vanier and Henri Nouwen, the priest, writer and theologian who left academia to live at L’Arche Daybreak in Richmond Hill, Ont. -- the first L’Arche community in Canada. At university, he also met Amber, who would become his fiancée and partner in the *As I Am* film series.

In 2007, McDonald was captivated when he heard Jean Vanier speak in Washington, D.C., he began thinking about joining L’Arche. Reflecting on Notre Dame’s lesson to all of its students – to answer the question, “Where is the school of the heart?” – he realized he needed to step out and act on his faith.

Fran McDonald would later tell his son he heard Vanier speak during a U.S. visit. In his speech, Vanier asked the crowd to pray for him.

“So my dad had been praying for Jean Vanier in secret for 20 years, or even 30 years. And I thought, wow, that was so cool,” McDonald said. “I think it’s my path. I think it’s the Holy Spirit. As long as I can keep a roof over my head and food in my body, where is the meaningful life? That’s how I was driven.”



McDonald displays photos of local L’Arche members during his visit to Edmonton. Andrew Ehrkamp, Grandin Media

McDonald didn’t speak a word of French, but he was placed in L’Arche France,

next door to Vanier's residence.

"When I walked into the home, I felt uncomfortable. In the house that I lived in, the people with disabilities – in L'Arche they're called core members – none of them were verbal. So we actually had an immediate connection," McDonald joked.

On his first day, a man in a wheelchair was hitting himself in the face, and another woman was making sounds like a bird. On instinct, McDonald pulled out his guitar and began playing. They joined in.

McDonald lived in France for a year and a half, and his own Catholic faith grew deeper in that time.

"In Catholicism and in the Abrahamic traditions in general we have the concept of *imago Dei*, made in the image and likeness of God, and L'Arche is built on that," McDonald said. "It operationalizes that concept. We know we live in a world that doesn't honour that very easily."

In 2009 McDonald started a three-year term at L'Arche in Nyharuru, Kenya, which was a far different experience from France. "The amount of discrimination is very high. We met a lot of people that still believe it's a curse to be disabled."



Pat Desnoyers

But L'Arche is so much more than just a place to care for the disabled, says Pat Desnoyers, executive director of L'Arche Edmonton. The local chapter runs a day program and has six homes that accommodate 23 people with disabilities and 20 assistants, funded mainly by the provincial government.

"It's not just about serving or about caregiving. It's about building relationships and seeing how our lives can change through that," Desnoyers said.

"People are often taken to that place of being really human, and the depth of relationship of a person with disabilities and without in that type of setting is quite incredible. There's a bond that happens."

But she concedes that life at L'Arche is far from perfect.

"It's very hard. It's very taxing. People are in settings of cultural difference, religious difference, ethnic difference, everything. How to create unity in that diversity is beautiful, and it's not easy."

McDonald experienced tough times as a L'Arche assistant, but tender moments as well.

"I have lot of really good friends, and I don't know if they would come to my death. But I have a lot of friends in L'Arche whose death I have gone to and who would come to mine."



McDonald at L'Arche in Kenya with Musa and others in 2011. Supplied

One friend, Musa Kirokote, will serve as a groomsman at McDonald's wedding. His is one story told in an *As I Am* video. When Musa was born, his mother threw him in a heap of burning trash when she saw he had a disability. But he was rescued by a woman walking nearby who raised him as her own son.

"His name in Swahili means 'Moses saved from the rubbish,' because just as Moses was found in a reed basket on the Nile, she found Musa in the trash," McDonald said. "He's come to peace with it."

Kirokote had been living at L'Arche Kenya since his parents died. When McDonald lived there, he ghost-wrote four books on L'Arche. In 2013 he obtained his master's degree in peace studies at Notre Dame and, with the university's help, returned to Kenya to start a radio program there, telling the stories of the disabled in an effort to reduce the stigma.

"I made a little video to announce the radio project, and that video was actually more popular than the radio project," McDonald explained. "Within two weeks it had been viewed in 80 countries. I got an email from the United Nations. They told me they would show it at their headquarters. All of a sudden that was when the door of film was opened."

After that, the requests for film projects flooded in. McDonald demurred but L'Arche insisted.

"I'd watch YouTube tutorials all night and then I'd show up and do it. I'm totally accidental."

With no formal video training, McDonald said Louis Pilotte – now the national leader of L'Arche Canada – told him: "You have the sense of L'Arche. All that technical stuff is not as important to me. It's a very L'Arche move because it's irresponsible. It's crazy.

"Jean Vanier's big thing was 'Society doesn't see the gifts inside of you. We're going to create a place where everyone is going to give you a standing ovation for those gifts. Even if you don't see them yet, through relationships, through time, they'll come to grow.' "

As he prepares for his upcoming wedding, with Musa Kirokote at his side, McDonald said he's found personal fulfillment in L'Arche – something he would never have imagined.

Pat Desnoyers isn't surprised.

"We talk in L'Arche about people's gifts being used to the fullest. He's the perfect example of someone whose gifts have been discovered and then used."