

# Montreal students struggle to weather storms of a life-time

BY IDELLA STURINO

MONTREAL (CUP) — Kathy Proot woke up later than usual last Tuesday morning because her alarm clock didn't go off. In fact it wasn't even working and neither was anything else requiring electricity, including the heat. So Proot made her way to the bathroom where she washed with cold water and put on her contact lenses by candlelight. She then went downstairs to the kitchen and ate breakfast in the dark.

By the time the McGill University student arrived at school, late for her second day of winter term classes, she thought to herself, "What am I doing here? I want to go home."

It was a sentiment echoed by many Montreal university students hit by the province-wide power failure caused by a massive ice storm early last week.

An eerie feeling pervades the city, with unusually quiet streets and trees disfigured under the weight of ice. Branches encased in inch-thick ice hover menacingly above people's heads as they walk along the sidewalks, dodging falling branches and patches of sheer ice.

Yet during the first few days of what is being described as the worst ice storm Quebec has ever seen, most university students tried to carry on business as usual.

Slippery roads, closed highways and sidewalks littered with fallen tree branches impeded travel and yet students trudged on, making their way through slush, hail and freezing rain to get to their classes. At the same time, uni-

versities were trying to carry on as if Montreal had not been transformed into a frozen city of darkness. Most were initially unaffected by the massive blackout which plunged just under 1-million Quebec households and businesses into darkness, as of Thursday night. The storm also affected parts of Ontario and the Maritimes.

By the middle of the week Proot had already received assignments in some of her classes, but couldn't do them because her apartment had no light, her computer wouldn't work and she was too busy trying to stay warm.

"It is seven degrees in my house," Proot said. "So cold that I can see my breath."

Many students would have preferred to stay at home in the cold or to go to one of the many shelters set up across Montreal than deal with school responsibilities, but they still came to class for fear of falling behind.

McGill student Shane Utter expressed a feeling of frustration and hopelessness at the situation.

"Things are getting worse and there's nothing you can do about it, yet I have to come to school," he said, adding that he preferred to be at home, tending the fireplace and caring for his 86-year-old grandmother and his dog.

But by Thursday, McGill and Montreal's other three major universities — Concordia, Université de Montreal and Université de Quebec a Montreal — responded to the concerns of students like Utter by canceling all classes. They are not expected

to re-open until January 12, by which time the ice storm is expected to abate.

"Our concern is for the needs of our clients — the students and staff. It was felt that it would be in the best interest of students to close down the university so they can concentrate better on their needs," Roger Cote, Concordia's dean of students, said.

Bishop's University in Lennoxville, an hour's drive east of Montreal, has so far not been affected by the ice storm. The area is prone to flooding, which may result from the storm, and the university is ready to evacuate if necessary. Quebec's colleges, which don't resume classes for another couple of weeks, were also unaffected.

At McGill, as with the rest of Montreal and Quebec, the storm has had at least one positive affect, giving people an opportunity to lend a helping hand. The student union turned the student centre into a shelter Thursday night for students and their families who were stranded on campus or left in the cold by the blackout.

"A lot of people came to our front desk saying, 'We have no heat or hot water, and asking what we would do to help,'" McGill student union president Tara Newell, said. Once the decision was made to use the student centre as a shelter, dozens of students called to offer help.

In the end, though, only four students came to use the shelter. This was attributed by Newell to the little time the council had to get the word

out. There were plans to make sure more people knew about the shelter for the weekend, but the project was scuttled when McGill's power went out Friday as a result of the spreading blackout.

The blackout spread Friday to Montreal's downtown core, which had been unaffected until then. Stores closed early and the streets were lined with slow-moving cars at-

tempting to navigate without traffic lights. Pedestrians scrambled to make their way to the crowded bus stops and watched the passing army trucks with curiosity. Troops are assisting in the restoration of power to the area.

Hydro Quebec predicts that it will be days before power distribution is back to normal across the province.

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