

# THE PIONEERS WHO SET THE FOUNDATION FOR ORNAC

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*All photos have been provided by the author from her archives. They were provided to her by various individuals who cannot be confirmed at this time.*

## Editor's Note:

When Clockwork Communications began as the publisher of the ORNAC Journal, in 2002, I was contacted by Gloria Stephens and Muriel Shewchuk to ask if I wanted to have coffee so they could “tell me what is what!”. As the association was new to me I was curious. I had no idea what I was in for. So much history, so many stories, so much energy. The two women earned my instant respect and admiration – while overloading my brain with information.

I have since met both women many times and I had the pleasure of seeing Muriel at her last ORNAC Conference. And I have the luck of living near Gloria which gives us a chance to visit in person – at our last visit my daughter (who was born just before I joined ORNAC... 3 days before in fact) joined us. She had the same reaction to Gloria – wow... just wow.

While this article may not be clinical in nature it is a testament to Gloria's passion for ORNAC and the absolute mountain of information she has to share. Information that should never be lost and that I believe is crucial to the OR nurses of today. I know I was so VERY thankful for the history she and Muriel were able to share with me that day. I hope you also enjoy it. And while you read imagine having this (and MORE) shared with you – peppered with a few jokes and hilarious stories – over the time span of a cup of coffee... it is a day I will never forget.

Deborah McNamara  
Editor, *ORNAC Journal*

## ABSTRACT

This article explores the history of perioperative nursing groups that evolved into the Operating Room Nurses Association of Canada. It covers a period of more than 60 years and recognizes the pioneers who helped build the foundation of perioperative nursing organization that exists today. It is written by one of ORNAC's Past Presidents and incorporates both stories that were shared with her and events that she experienced first-hand.

## INTRODUCTION

As the World Health Organization (WHO) designated as the

“International Year of the Nurse and the Midwife” it seemed a perfect time to reflect on where we came from and recognize the pioneers who, through their steadfast efforts, laid the foundation of today's Operating Room Nurses Association of Canada (ORNAC).

## The Beginnings

It was 1956 when the English OR nurses of Montreal formed the first OR nursing group in Canada. It was established under the direction of Isabelle Adams and Mary Taylor (ORNAC's *Isabelle Adams Award for Excellence in Perioperative Nursing* is named in her honour). In 1960 Victorie

Audet formed a French speaking OR Nurses Group, also based in Montreal. She had attended a film presentation on 'Asepsis' at the Montreal General Hospital and following the film presentation Victorie met Vivian Crouse who was the OR Supervisor and also the Co-President of the Montreal English OR Nurses Group, her objective was to get two French and two English speaking nurses on the Executive and to combine the two groups in to one. Victorie was sitting between two English speaking nurses ("I thought were friends" said Victorie), they poked my ribs, and they said "Stand up, Vickey!" Victorie stood up and volunteered thus beginning twenty years of her participation in advancing OR nursing. The three, Adams, Taylor and Audet, developed a close association.

The two groups combined making the Quebec OR Group official. The group's first provincial conference was held in 1961, at the Jewish General Hospital, in Montreal, with the theme of 'Disasters'. "With no experience we selected the Exhibitors, visited their warehouses, and told them what they should exhibit, not knowing that we should ask a fee, said Victorie. "After the meeting, two or three Exhibitors gave us ten dollars. We soon got wise to the situation."

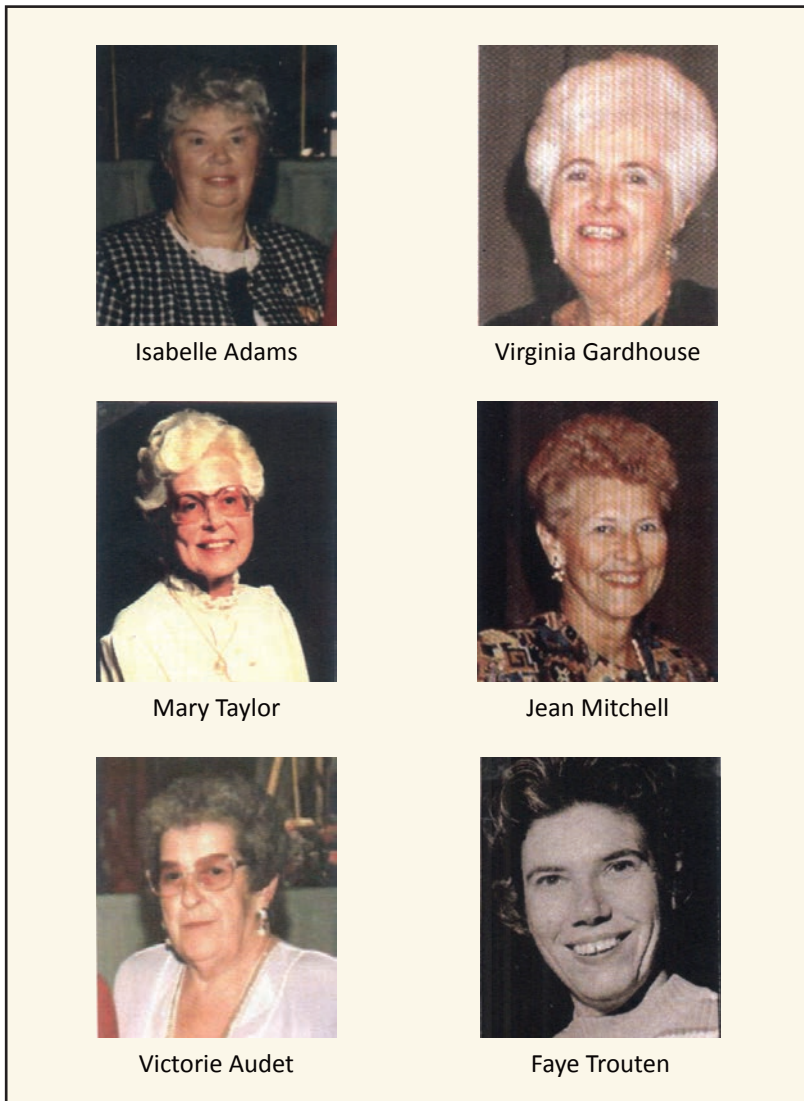
The evening before the conference opening Victorie received a call that translation would not be available so she spent the night translating the speakers' presentations. Later, in 1991, Geraldine McEvoy, the Co-Chairman of the Operating Room Nurses of Quebec, presented Victorie with its first *Award of Excellence in Operating Room Nursing*. The second OR group to form in Canada was also launched in 1960 in Toronto and became known as the Greater Toronto OR Nurses. Those initially involved were Virginia Gardhouse, Jean (Mitchell) Bain, Jean Watson, and Faye (Trouten) Blenkhorne.

Following close behind was a Halifax group in 1963, spearheaded by Donald 'Don' Carruthers who was the OR Supervisor of the Victoria General Hospital in Halifax.

In just 3 years Canada had three city operating room nursing groups: Montreal, Toronto, and Halifax. But we did not yet have any provincial organizations.

**Provincial Involvement**

In 1965, at the Royal York Hotel in Toronto, a meeting was chaired by Jean Wilson and hosted by Davis & Geck, a suture company. Isabelle Adams and Victorie Audet presented on their Montreal group's structure and outlined the pros and cons. In attendance were Ethel Blenkinsopp (Vancouver), Joan Charbonneau (Edmonton), Elaine Chewings (Winnipeg), Mariette Nickerson (Saint John), Don Carruthers (Halifax) and Yvette de Rose Willesley, Mary O'Farrell, Sylvia Langford and June Short (all from Toronto).



Isabelle Adams



Virginia Gardhouse



Mary Taylor



Jean Mitchell



Victorie Audet



Faye Trouten

A unanimous decision was reached during this 1965 meeting: that a National Committee/Conference was essential, funds would be provided by Toronto and Quebec groups, and a date was set for 1970 in Montreal. Montreal was chosen because Quebec, organized since 1956, had both exhibitor experience, the funds to sponsor two delegates from the provinces that did not have an organized OR group, and the bilingual advantage. Between 1966 and 1969 the National Committee worked with different provinces to assist with organizing OR groups. Ethel Blenkinsopp, OR Supervisor of Vancouver General Hospital, organized a meeting of OR nurses, from across BC, in the Willow Chest Pavilion. Seventy-five nurses attended and with \$39.20 collected from the group, the British Columbia Operating Room Nurses Group (BCORNG) was formed. It was the fourth OR organization in Canada and the first provincial group. The Executive divided the province into regions, with each having its own executive and with guidelines provided by the BCORNG Executive. The first Provincial Executive was made up of

Joan Flower, President (OR Instructor at St. Paul's Hospital), Ellen Schrodtt, Vice-President (staff OR at St. Paul's Hospital), Anita Williams, Secretary (Vancouver General Hospital), Corrine McGibbon, Treasurer (Vancouver General Hospital), and Gloria Stephens, Newsletter (St. Paul's Hospital). Note – the nurses paid their own expenses, related to this group, for many years.

**1970 First National Committee Meeting and Conference**

Isabelle Adams chaired the 1970 Montreal National Committee meeting. At this meeting it was agreed that a National Conference would be held every two years, with a National Committee meeting taking place in between conferences. It was agreed that the National Committee meetings would be held in conjunction with the Greater Toronto OR Nurses Annual meeting. Faye Trouten was appointed the next National Committee Chairman for the 1973 conference for Toronto.

The first National conference took place at the same time and was hosted by the



Ethel Blenkinsopp



Joan Flower



Don Carruthers



Gloria Stephens

“A unanimous decision was reached during this 1965 meeting: that a National Committee/Conference was essential...”

Quebec OR Group and chaired by Isabelle Adams with Mary Taylor and Victorie Audet as Co-Chairs. 1,200 nurses from across Canada attended the conference and witnessed the great fanfare of its opening with anticipation for the future of the new National Committee.

**1972 Vancouver**

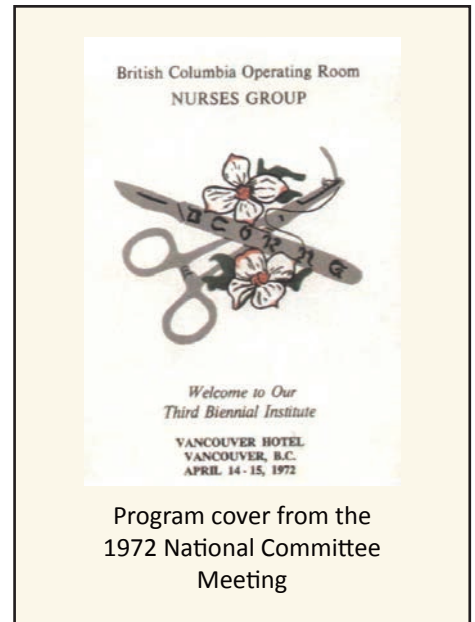
The 1972 National Committee Meeting was held in conjunction with BCORNG’s biannual conference and held at the Vancouver hotel. The National Committee Chairman was Gloria Stephens, BCORNG President and conference coordinator. Gloria invited Faye Trouten to attend this meeting to promote Faye’s position as National Chairman of 1973 conference and the National Committee concept, as not all in BC and Western Canada supported the concept. She presented on the past, present, and future plans of the National Committee.

**1973 Toronto**

The 1973 Conference was held at the Skyline Hotel, in Toronto, and was coordinated by Chairman Faye Trouten and Co-Chair Virginia Gardhouse. (Note: when ORNAC was first established in 1983 Faye became the first Clinical Editor of the *Canadian Operating Room Nursing Journal*.) The author was there as the moderator for a session entitled ‘Meeting the Needs of Patients – Pre and Post Visits’.

Faye’s memories of this conference were told to the author as this:

“The exhibit area was open and therefore required security officers around the clock. At 1:00 am I was told that a security guard had not arrived for duty. Virginia and I went down to the Exhibit area, resplendent in rollers and housecoats, to secure the area until the security guard arrived. The attendance at the conference numbered 1,500 and a highlight was a conducted tour of the Ethicon Sutures Plant in Peterborough.”



After this event these national conferences became an expectation and were now a fait accompli for Canada. Faye Trouten also chaired the 1973 National Committee meeting where goals and objectives were developed, the decision was made that the hosting president for the next conference would become the Chairman, and that the committee needed provincial organizations in every province by the next conference. The nurses who were in attendance were Mabel DeVarenes and Gail Curry (NS), Helen MacLeod (PE), Elizabeth Neilson and Aulda Yerrea (NB), Isabelle Adams and Reine Lambert-Balkoivccia (QC), Jean Mitchell and Florence Bastie (ON), and Joan Burnett, Kay Raisbeck, and Gloria Stephens (BC).

**1974 Montreal**

The 1974 National Committee Meeting took place at the Queen Elizabeth Hotel in Montreal and was chaired by Victorie Audet. The meeting Secretary was Gloria Stephens, the President of BCORNG. The main topics discussed were: Terms of Reference for the National Committee; naming of a National Chairman; the amendment and approval of the committee goals and objectives; details of the committee’s financial situation, and the future of the National Committee and how it could

increase membership. As the group had agreed that the Chairman should be selected based on the next conference location Jean Kerr, incoming President of BCORNG, was appointed as the next National Committee Chairman.

**1975 Toronto**

While the 1975 conference was controlled by the Greater Toronto OR Nurses the National Committee considered it to be a National Conference and therefore documented it as the third national OR conference. At the time there had been several articles in nursing journals about the necessity of producing Nursing Standards of Care. The Toronto planning committee were aware of the BC Standards document, through Faye Trouten, and invited Gloria Stephens to present on it as an introduction of the concept of standards for operating room nursing. Gloria's background included attending sessions on developing standards at the University of Seattle, acting as Chairman, and spearheading, a committee to write and produce the first Standards of Patient Care in Canada, under BCORNG, and with committee members Joan Burnett, Rene Jensen, and Jean Kerr, in 1973. She received the *RNABC Innovative Award* for this achievement. The title for the presentation was "Developing a Quality Assurance Program within the Operating Room." The idea for these national OR Standards did not, however, progress and it took ten more years before the concept took-hold.

The 1975 National Committee meeting took place in Toronto in conjunction with the conference. Meeting highlights included: the mandating of Terms of Reference for the next meeting, establishing a voting procedure for a National Executive (voting was not yet executed), financial discussions, and efforts to convince doubters that a National Committee and Executive was both necessary and imperative.

**1976 Vancouver**

This 1976 National Committee Meeting and Conference was held at the Hotel

Vancouver. This was the first time these two events had taken place in Western Canada.

The National Committee meeting was chaired by Jean Kerr and sponsored by BCORNG. The delegates attending the meeting were Mabel DeVarenes and Gail Curry (NS), Isabelle Adams and Reine Lambert-Balkoivccia (QC), Helen MacLeod (PEI), Jean Mitchell and Florence Bastie (ON), Elizabeth Neilson and Aulda Yerrea (NB), and Joan Burnett, Kay Raisbeck, and Gloria Stephens (BC). The outcome of the meeting was to proceed as previously organized:

- National Committee Chairman also be the National Conference coordinator;
- The committee to meet at each National Conference, every two years;
- Meetings, in between conferences, will take place in conjunction with the Greater Toronto OR Nurses conference; and
- Terms of Reference for the National Committee having been completed, were accepted.

The 1976 conference theme was Unite for Excellence in recognition of the unity behind the idea of a national organization. As part of the publicity a logo, with this theme, was printed on envelopes.

This was the first week-long national OR nursing conference. The week was broken up into designated days: National, Western, Prairies, Eastern, and Atlantic. The education program was the first to have concurrent sessions and the first to offer full French translation. 1,000 people (delegates and exhibitors) attended the conference.

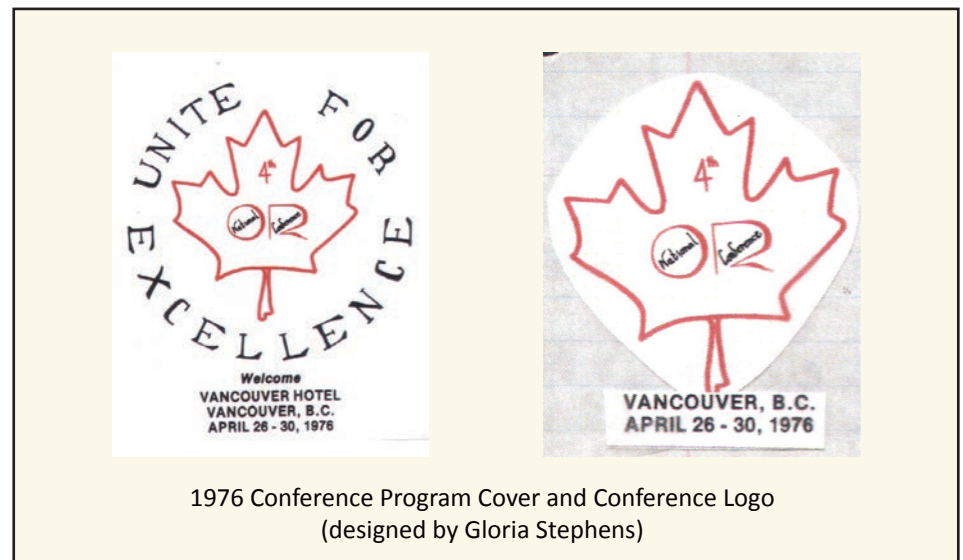
Gloria Stephens, as Program Chairman, wanted the Conference to have a national flair and so invited several prominent nurses and doctors, from across Canada, to speak.

Dr. Hans Selye of Montreal, an expert on how stress affects the body, accepted the group's invitation to speak but his fee was more than the group could afford. After pleading their case the doctor agreed to send his assistant to make the presentation (at a fee of \$500 instead of \$3,000).

The American Operating Room Nurses (AORN), was represented for the first time in Canada by AORN Past-President Ruth S. Metzger. She was the closing speaker with her presentation on the "Future for the OR Nurse: Where are we Going?"

The Farewell Luncheon was hosted by the BC Government and was followed by a Vancouver Harbour Tour.

Despite all the promotion of Unite for Excellence a national organization was not yet to be – to the disappointment of



1976 Conference Program Cover and Conference Logo (designed by Gloria Stephens)



The first elected ORNAC Executive (L to R: Shirley Hemerling, Ann Robinson, Valerie Shirreff, Joan Donald, Dorothy Orr).

many. But the back of the conference program promoted the future by featuring details of the 1978 conference to take place in Halifax, NS.

**1978 Halifax**

The Halifax conference, held at the Nova Scotian hotel, was attended by 500 delegates and coordinated by Gail Curry, OR Supervisor of the IWK (Children’s hospital). The president of the OR Halifax Group was Mabel deVarnner. This conference is considered to be the 5<sup>th</sup> national with the theme being: ‘Change Today – to Meet Tomorrow’, The Nova Scotia Government sponsored a lobster dinner for the delegates.

The National Committee meeting was chaired by Mabel deVarenner and a few of the highlights from this meeting were discussions regarding ‘standards of care’ (but nothing concrete developed), a request submitted to Davis & Geck to assist with hiring professional translators (as previous translation had received complaints), bilingualism on all documents pertaining to the National Committee and National Conferences,

the need for a National Exhibitors Committee with OR Nurses represented, having booth fees include all banquet and Exhibitor’s Night costs.

**1980 Toronto**

The 1980 National Conference and National Committee meeting was held in Toronto and chaired by Jean (Mitchell) Bain. Details of the Toronto conference were not available to the author.

**1982 Winnipeg**

The National Committee meeting was held in Winnipeg, coordinated by Jane Malach, and had many new faces and a group that was looking for more concrete decisions. It was becoming clear that people wanted a national organization with an elected National Executive to represent OR nurses across the country.

Following initial discussion of the idea in 1956, and promotion of it by Gloria Stephens at the 1976 Vancouver conference, it seemed that after all these years the concept might get off the ground – driven forward by a new group of younger, energized, nurses who could visualize its future.

A motion to develop a National Organization, with an elected Executive, was put forward. During the discussion period several nurses spoke negatively about the motion and the meeting became very heated. It was, in the end, suggested that a committee be formed to discuss the issue and bring recommendations to the large assembly. This idea was accepted.



Jane Malach

Muriel Shewchuk

Valerie Shirreff

After the conference's opening ceremony a publisher, Agnes Forster, spoke to several delegates during the coffee break about the fact that she wanted to start a national OR nursing journal but could not do so without a national association. This became a key factor in getting things moving.

As a result of this information an emergency meeting of the National Committee, including all the delegates, was called and major decisions were made:

1. A National organization called the Operating Room Nurses Association of Canada (ORNAC) was accepted;
2. An Executive was voted into place. The first ORNAC Executive consisted of President: Valerie Shirreff (ON); Vice-President: Ann Ross-Robinson (QC); Second Vice-President: Dr. Joan Donald (NB); Treasurer: Shirley Hemerling (BC); and Secretary: Dorothy Orr (AB); and
3. Twenty Board Members were elected (two from each province).

Thus ORNAC was born. Following these major decisions it was also agreed to have Agnes Forster's company, Health Media Inc, start a national OR journal on behalf of ORNAC. Health Media remained the publisher of the Canadian Operating Room Nursing Journal (CORNJ) until 2002 when ORNAC became owner of the journal upon Agnes' retirement.

### 1983 Toronto

Since the next National conference was slated for Jasper, the National Committee Chairman named was Muriel Shewchuk, therefore she chaired the National Committee meeting in Toronto and immediately turned the Chairman position over to Valerie Shirreff who had been voted in as ORNAC President in 1982. This signified the end of the National OR Committee and Operating Room Nurses Association of Canada (ORNAC) became the official national group of OR nursing. During this meeting the first ORNAC Standards Committee was also formed and it

comprised Gloria Stephens, Muriel Shewchuk, and Joan Donald. The first published standards (French and English) were released at the 1986 conference and were titled Recommended Standards for Operating Room Nursing Practice with an additional Quality Assurance Audit. They were sold for \$12 per copy. Later the document was referred to as the 'Professional Standards'.

### 1984 Jasper

The 1984 Conference, the first under the umbrella of ORNAC, was held in Jasper, AB, with the theme Mountains to Climb. The Conference Coordinator was Muriel Shewchuk of Alberta (then the Unit Educator/Instructor at the University of Alberta Hospital, in Edmonton). A gavel was presented to Valerie Sheriff, at this meeting, by the OR Nurses Association of Alberta and two awards committees were formed – the Isabelle Adams Award for Excellence in Operating Room Nursing and the Drake-Thompson Editorial Memorial Award – with Muriel Shewchuk as Chairman, a Fundraising Committee (which later became the Finance Committee) was established under the direction of the Treasurer.

### A bit about those from the early days

Valerie (Val) Shirreff, was Unit Administrator at the Mississauga Hospital when she became ORNAC's first President (1983-1986). Val passed away in 1990 and an ORNAC Award is named in her honour.

Ann Ross-Robinson, the initial Vice-President, was the OR Coordinator at the Montreal Children's Hospital. She was also appointed as the first Chairman of the ORNAC Bylaws Committee, she became ORNAC's second President (1986-1988).

Dr. Joan Donald, the initial 2nd Vice President of ORNAC, was the Assistant Director of the Operating Room, Recovery Room, and Day Surgery at the Moncton General Hospital at the time. Joan was also on the original standards committee responsible for the first National ORNAC Standards (with

Gloria Stephens and Muriel Shewchuk). Joan later became ORNAC's third President (1988-1990).

Dorothy Orr, the first ORNAC Secretary and National Committee Liaison, was Head Nurse of the Operating Room, Recovery Room, and Central Supply Area at the Brooks Health Centre. Dorothy, along with Muriel Shewchuk, produced the first ORNAC historical document titled 'COMMUNIQUÉ', 1965-1986 and another 1986-1991.

Gloria Stephens, third President of BCORNG, was a member of the first ORNAC Standards Committee and was the fourth ORNAC President (1990-1993). An ORNAC Award in her name recognizes excellence as an Educator in perioperative nursing. She authored the last Communiqué of ORNAC history covering 1991-1999. Gloria currently lives in Halifax, NS. She remained lifelong friends with many of those involved in the early days – most notably Muriel Shewchuk.

Shirley Hemerling was ORNAC Treasurer for two terms. She was BCORNG President (1992-1994). At the time of ORNAC's founding she was a staff nurse at Kelowna General Hospital in BC.

Muriel Shewchuk was the coordinator of the Jasper ORNAC Conference, the first under the new association, and a member of the first Standards Committee. She was passionately dedicated to leadership and was active in CORL. An ORNAC Award in Muriel's name recognizes perioperative nursing leaders. Muriel passed away in 2017 shortly after attending yet another ORNAC Conference (in Niagara Falls) with her daughter who is also a perioperative nurse.

This is not the end of the story – it is just the beginning. ORNAC continues to grow and move forward with the times and has accomplished much. But it is so important to remember those from the past who set the stage with a low flame... and the flame managed to enlarge as new life emerged. 🌱