

Women of influence share insight, inspiration and encouragement

BY ERIN MCCrackEN

South Africa's High Commissioner to Canada, the second woman to hold that position, hopes International Women's Day won't need to be celebrated one day.

"Because it's not normal," Sibongiseni Dlamini-Mntambo told those gathered for River Ward's annual Women's Day speaker series at the Hunt Club-Riverside Park Community Centre on March 6. "We should all be seen as human, (for) our contributions to the economy, our contributions to politics, not because you are a woman."

Dlamini-Mntambo's experiences were shaped by the politics of her country, having grown up under the apartheid system of racial segregation.

She overcame enormous adversity from birth. She was just three days old when her father abandoned her and her mother, who then had to leave her baby with relatives to find work.

"She was my rock during those days. She still is, a selfless dedicated woman who made incredible sacrifices to provide for her child," Dlamini-Mntambo said.

She eventually attended school, walking dusty roads barefoot. She went on to finish high school, a post-secondary degree and eventually a master's degree.

"My time at university was not without upheaval," Dlamini-Mntambo said during the Women's Day event, co-hosted by River Coun. Riley Brockington and Innes Coun. Laura Dudas, Ottawa's first woman deputy mayor.

"I would occasionally need to choose between classes and political rallies, between the quest for knowledge and the desire for a just society, and... between education and dodging tear gas," Dlamini-Mntambo said.

She was employed as a teacher before becoming the first black person to work as a public relations officer at a state food manufacturing company.

"I was young, ambitious, and



Erin McCracken photos

There was a sizeable crowd at River Ward's annual Women's Day speaker series at the Hunt Club-Riverside Park Community Centre on March 6.

educated," she recalled.

But her boss was angry, inexperienced, younger, less educated and a bully. She was also white.

South Africa's job market at the time did not buy into Nelson Mandela's message of equality, Dlamini-Mntambo said. So she chose to work hard to prove herself and would go on to climb the corporate ladder despite comments about her race and gender.

Anti-apartheid pleas for peace and justice during her university days were met with violent oppression by the white government. She recalled a march by 20,000 South African women in 1956, which she said led to significant change in the emancipation of women.

Though countless strides have been made since the end of apartheid, Dlamini-Mntambo said the struggle continues.

"Don't forget that everybody is human," she said. "If you are successful, it is because society or somebody has helped you to reach your position."

She urged women to help other women, particularly when they achieve positions of influence in the boardroom.

"Once you are there, if you are part of that table, make sure you open space to get other women to be at the table," Dlamini-Mntambo said. "Don't suddenly think that because you are now on this table, it's OK for those

women to get the crumbs."

DR. VERA ETCHES

The first woman to become Ottawa's medical officer of health was born to parents who were rural family doctors in northern B.C., who showed by example the importance of giving back to community.

The first tip Dr. Vera Etches shared was finding something you like to do that keeps you active, allowing you to live well, feel good about yourself and care for others.

Etches spoke of being discouraged when she didn't get into medical school the first time she applied, which caused her to doubt her abilities.

Her second try was successful, and she said having more maturity by that point was beneficial.

Her second tip? "Try again if things don't work the first time." In medical school, she worked alongside public health nurses in Malawi, in southeastern Africa, where there were significant public health issues, such as HIV, AIDS and malnutrition.

It was there Etches saw first hand how political divisions impact health, and that public health efforts can prevent outbreaks, control disease and provide education and programming.

PLEASE SEE WOMEN, PAGE 11



Barriers that stand in our way need to not just be chipped at, but bulldozed over."

- Innes Coun. Laura Dudas, Ottawa Deputy Mayor



"Try again if things don't work the first time."

- Dr. Vera Etches, Ottawa's Medical Officer of Health



"We should all be seen as human ... not because you are a woman."

- Sibongiseni Dlamini-Mntambo, South Africa's High Commissioner to Canada



"Don't be the person that watches the action."

- Cheryl Jensen, President and CEO, Algonquin College

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After working as a family physician, Etches went on to join Ottawa Public Health in 2009. She became Ottawa's interim medical health officer in late 2017 and was officially hired to the post in 2018.

She credits her team for inspiring her, and said it's important to find a work environment where people inspire and push you to keep learning.

As a woman who became a mother later in life, she also offered a cautionary message of the risks that come with pregnancy after age 35 and also potential challenges to become pregnant after that age.

Etches also shared the challenges of raising young children. She said she relies on her husband's parenting since he works part time, and that sometimes she has to say no to work-related engagements to put family first.

Her final tip? "Find help when you need it and to recognize that you can't do everything yourself."

CHERYL JENSEN

In 2014, Cheryl Jensen became Algonquin College's eighth president and the first woman to achieve that top post.

Women can be their own kind of superhero, that is, women of steel, she said.

"Before the Man of Steel was faster than a speeding bullet," Jensen said referring to Superman, "the saying was he was faster than a streak of lightning, more powerful than the pounding surf, and mightier than a roaring hurricane."

The CEO, who is on several boards, said she has tried to be all those things to get where she is today.

She shared a list of tips related to her background in chemistry

and the metallurgy of iron and steel, which she said served her well as a woman working in male-dominated fields.

- Be versatile like steel to prepare for a changing job market and be open to lifelong learning, she advised.

- Change will help you weather challenge and disappointment, but not break you, also like steel.

"Remember that outside forces will come along and change your career path when you least expect it," said Jensen, who was laid off from a steel company in the early 1980s, which led her to the education sector, including as a professor.

"If I hadn't been forced to make that change, I wouldn't be standing in front of you today," she said.

- Be a good conductor, like steel, to bring people together, fight for things that matter, move initiative towards completion, broker deals and bring skeptics



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on board, said Jensen.

"Don't be the person that watches the action."

- Stainless steel resists corrosion. It doesn't rust, she said, likening this quality to standing up for what is right, never compromising on beliefs and ethics, and not letting negativity prey on your goals or wear you down.

"Be a woman of steel and fight that corrosion at every level," she advised.

She also stressed the important role women can play in contributing to the evolution of women in the workforce.

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"You can be faster than a streak of lightning, more powerful than the pounding surf, and mightier than that roaring hurricane," said Jensen.

"More than that, with your courage, you can believe in yourself. With your compassion, you can empower other women. With your minds, you can create and innovate and with your heart of steel you truly can change the world, even if it's just a little part of the world here in Ottawa."

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