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From the Editor's desk: Inspiring women delivered a message that lasts

September 12, 2009

BY LYNN HADRALL,
 RECORD EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

I was inspired this week to see more than 500 women gather at Bingemans for the third annual Inspiring Women conference, organized by the Waterloo Region Small Business Centre. I've been an MC at the event since its inception in 2007 and have met many talented women, on the stage as guest speakers and between sessions.

Kathy Weiss, manager of the business centre, and her event committee have attracted some high-profile speakers, such as Sarah Ferguson last year and Erin Brockovich this year. They also work hard to round out the day with speakers who aren't as well-known but who have equally compelling stories to share. And they present the Marie Seiler-Linden Award to an exceptional local woman who inspires others and encourages innovation. This year's recipient is Charlene Williams.



Charlene Williams was the recipient of the Marie Seller-Lin ...

The morning session on Thursday featured the award presentation, as well as Manjit Minhas and Joelle Berdugo-Adler. It did not disappoint.

Manjit talked about her career as a young entrepreneur. She started Mountain Crest Liquors Inc. in Alberta when she was just 19, even though her education was in engineering. In late 2002, she and her brother, Ravinder, founded Minhas Creek Brewing Company, expanding into Manitoba and Saskatchewan.

Manjit told the audience that the key to her success was "far from mystical and pretty simple." She laid out four mantras that she follows: There is no substitute for hard work; trust and be trusted; stick to what you know; live within your means.

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The siblings are three weeks from launching the beer in Ontario, just in time for Oktoberfest, she pointed out. Manjit and Ravinder have captured the story of their brewery in a book titled *Brewing Up a Damn Good Story*. They've also produced some television commercials that are edgy and poke fun at the bigger breweries.

The second speaker had an equally impressive story, filled with poignant personal moments. Joelle Berdugo-Adler, president of Diesel Canada, began the Lou Adler Foundation in 2004 to honour her late husband and business partner, who died of cancer. A year later she created One x One, a foundation that raises money for underprivileged children in Canada and around the world. The fund has gained recognition recently from celebrity endorsers including Matt Damon, Brad Pitt and Bono. Last year's keynote speaker Sarah Ferguson is also a supporter.

"Joey" believes a passion-filled life can lead to giving back to the community. She spoke of the defining moments in her life, when she realized she wanted to spend it promoting the value of human life.

Charlene Williams has also committed her life to helping others. Jan Varner, of the United Way, said that Charlene's passion does not end with her job and that she treats each obstacle as a stepping stone.

"She fights for herself and for others. She is known for being kind and firm. She is a positive role model for other women, encouraging them to push through the pain and come out on the other side. She is respected by colleagues as someone with a principled sense of social justice and an inspiration to all she comes in contact with," Jan said.

Charlene overcame an alcohol addiction, finished high school as an adult, and went on to get a Bachelor of Arts from Wilfred Laurier and an Addiction Careworker diploma from McMaster University. She organizes retreats and volunteers, even on Christmas Day, to improve the lives of others.

Charlene said it is important to carry the message to other women "that you can do anything if you set your mind to it." After starting her recovery journey about 19 years ago, she now supervises the program she attended.

She accepted the award on behalf of all the inspiring women she has known and met.

Keynote speaker Erin Brockovich delivered an entertaining, uplifting message, answering questions about the differences between her real story and the movie. No, she didn't marry the "biker dude" in the movie and no, she wasn't really Miss Wichita, although she was Miss Pacific Coast.

She wore an elegant black pant suit and camisole, not a short skirt and bustier, but her "potty mouth" was in fine form and the f-word flowed freely as she described her battle with a massive American utility company. That led to a record-setting multi-million-dollar settlement for families affected by the toxic material they had been exposed to, due to the company's neglect.

Erin summed up the spirit of the day when she encouraged audience members to stay true to their own beliefs and strive to right wrongs where they see them. She urged everyone to fit inspiration into their life. You can hear excerpts of her speech in a video at www.therecord.com.

The challenge for all of us who attended the Inspiring Women conference is to carry that message beyond the one-day event. With the help of people like Charlene Williams, we most surely can.

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