

Chamber's B.O.L.D summit raises tough questions on Mental Health Month



Fresh out of university, Rebecca Shields took on the role of Director of Development for the Greater Vancouver Food Bank.

It was situated in a part of the city that, she says, is 'the most open drug-using community in Canada' but, on the flipside, is 'known as the friendliest place in the world.'

Tasked with raising money for the cause, she encountered one woman every week who had clearly spent time living on the streets.

One day, however, the same woman came in carrying two cans of baby formula.

The food bank, as it happened, changed the woman's life for the better and she came back to help pay it forward for other community members in need.

'She said to me, 'If the food bank hadn't been there for me when I was a new mom, I would never have survived for my baby, and I never want another mother to experience that,' Shields recalls. 'I learned dignity at that moment; I learned that it doesn't matter where you come from in life, you can make the world less of a hell for the person coming behind.'

It was a chance encounter that changed the trajectory of Shields' life, one that led her to her current role as CEO of the Canadian Mental Health Association of York Region and South Simcoe, an organization that has had an indelible impact on the communities it serves.

Shields was among six female leaders in our community who came together on Thursday morning for the Aurora Chamber of Commerce's annual Women's Summit, which was held at the Royal Venetian Mansion.

The theme of this year's summit was BOLD - Believe It, Own It, Love It, Do It - and the Chamber brought together an impressive array of speakers who live up to the theme.

Among the speakers were entrepreneurs Zuly Matallana, founder and owner of TIARA; Andrea DeGasperi-Ronco, Principal of Opus Homes; Janis Showers of The Car Girls; and fittingly for Mental Health Awareness Month, entrepreneur and mental health advocate Cherry Rose Tan, Serena Thompson, founder of Aurora's Lighthouse Learning & Development Centre, and Shields.

Fresh off celebrating the tenth anniversary of the CMHA-YRSS' mobile mental health unit - MOBYSS - in Bradford earlier in the week, Shields focused on her role of being a communicator in an often-challenging health field.

'We treat youth as young as twelve all the way up to people who are in their elder years, and one thing I have learned is that it's not the illness itself, it's the stigma attached to it, and that makes it so hard to recover,' she said. 'It's so pervasive and the reason we know that a lot of people don't access the care they need, but it's also the reason people don't understand that they need to access the care that they need.'

Underscoring the issue of stigma, she shared a story of a friend who was reluctant to share that he lived with anxiety and panic attacks, despite the fact she was working in the mental health field by that point. It highlighted just how much work was needed to break down stigma like this and, most importantly, find a cure for mental illness.

Finding a cure, she stressed, is not just a dream - very real progress is being made to better address and treat mental health, including a focus on neuroplasticity, the long-term impacts of brain injury, and the development of Rapid Transcranial Magnetic Stimulation (RTMS) as a treatment.

'Thirty-five years ago, if you had a child with paediatric cancer, the mortality rate was over 95 per cent,' she said. 'It was devastating, and government, doctors, researchers, hospitals, care donors, rallied. Do you know that today, if you have a child with paediatric cancer, the mortality rate is less than two per cent? [In] July 2024, less than a year ago, the second cure by the World Health Organization was announced for HIV and AIDS. Just stop and think about that: the most stigmatized virus in the world. Millions of people are dying because of it, and now USAID has been cancelled, now we can't even provide life-saving medication.'

'If we could get that cure, we wouldn't have to worry about USAID anymore, and we can save lives all across the continent of Africa. If they can do it for such a stigmatized disease, why are we not doing this for mental illness?... It's actually possible.'

A local solution that will go a long way for people living with mental health challenges will be the completion of York Region's first community-led mental health community care centre in Newmarket - 'I wanted to call it the mental health and addiction crisis centre' and then we had to, for zoning reasons, call it the 'community care centre' - we'll talk about stigma later, but that will be a circular conversation,' said Shields.

Created for individuals aged 12 and up, it's intended to be an alternative to visiting the emergency room. It will have 20 stabilization and withdrawal management beds, walk-in services for those in crisis, and more.

'We have a single goal for that centre: what needs to change so that somebody's first mental health crisis will be their last? We are building and we're inviting everyone in the community to answer the question: what needs to change so that somebody's first mental health crisis is their last? We have over 20 partners, we are working with police, we are working with paramedics, we are working with primary care, we're working with the school boards, and we want to work with the Chamber [to] understand, for all of us, what needs to be changed?'

'If you have a loved one that is in crisis, what do you want to know before you even walk in the door? Instead of actually triaging and treating, our job is going to be to de-escalate that crisis and connect you on to the right next level of care. Whether you're 12-years-old, and then go back to school? how do we integrate you back into school and university? We're working with Southlake and all of the hospitals, and we need to work together.'

'We bring applied solutions in order to solve real-world problems together to those root causes, because if you just say, 'Okay, here's medication,' we haven't solved the root cause of why somebody's in there in the first place and you're going to be in that cycle of crisis?. I need you to come and tell me what needs to change. We're trying to connect with as many diverse communities as we can - and [we] can't do it alone.'

By Brock Weir