

Women's Summit highlights Lighthouse's local success story



It sometimes takes a few 'BOLD' moves to make a difference, and several of Aurora's bold leaders came together on Thursday afternoon for the Aurora Chamber of Commerce's annual Women's Summit.

The theme of this year's summit was B.O.L.D. - 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 DeGasperis-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, Rebecca Shields of the Canadian Mental Health Association of York Region and South Simcoe, and Serena Thompson, founder of Aurora's Lighthouse Learning & Development Centre.

Thompson's story struck a particularly local note as Lighthouse, which offers education and opportunities for students living on the Autism Spectrum, is celebrating 10 years of success in 2025.

From its humble beginnings as a small school located out of a renovated home on Old Yonge Street, it now boasts a state-of-the-art facility on Edward Street, with 13,000 square feet of classrooms, learning spaces, and more.

'The first defining moment of my journey was September 24, 2008, the day my son was diagnosed with autism,' Thompson shared with Summit attendees. 'The second came six years later on the 24th of November when the principal of his school informed me that if I punished him, I would fix him. Daniel was eight-years-old, limited speech, and just had a tough day at school - nothing out of the ordinary when you're raising a child with autism, or the last time I checked, any child. But instead of compassion, support, or strategy, I was told he was broken and needed to be fixed.'

'I'd love to say that this was the first time ignorance affected my son's education, but it wasn't. It was our third attempt at finding a suitable school for him in just three years. I was done and the world wasn't making space for my child, so I needed to. That night I went home and announced that I was going to open a school. There was no plan, no road map, and in fact I was employed with York Regional Police at the time, the furthest thing from education that might even be possible. I loved my job and wanted to retire from YRP. I have no background in education at all, but I knew that if Daniel was going to have any opportunity, I needed to build it for him.'

Thompson didn't waste any time. Just 15 days later, on December 9, 2014, she incorporated Lighthouse. They registered their first student six months later, and seven years after that, they moved into their new digs.

401 days after that, she said, she stood on the same stage she walked on Thursday to accept the Entrepreneur of the Year award from the Aurora Chamber and, shortly thereafter, they formed a formal partnership with The El Center for Autism to bring their renowned suite of adult services to the community as well.

Less than a year later, from signing that partnership, two of our first Career Connection students walked into NewRoads Automotive, who came to us and agreed to get on this crazy journey with us and NewRoads has accepted them and taken them on full-heartedly, said Thompson.

As she looked back on these milestones, she pondered what would have happened had she not taken the bold move to move forward with Lighthouse.

How much of Daniel's life would have been wasted? she wondered. Theodore Roosevelt said, 'In any moment of decision, the best thing you can do is the right thing, the next best thing is the wrong thing, and the worst thing is nothing.' How often do we look back and say, 'I should have done that,' or 'I wish I had just gone for it.' How many times have we let fear, doubt, or an endless list of what could go wrong stop us from doing something that could have changed everything? I've had countless moments of quiet questioning, asking what I was thinking and how risky it was, or how wrong it could have gone.

The weight of the responsibility, not just to my own child, but every single family at Lighthouse can be overwhelming, but when I think about it, it all started from one bold, emotional, wine-fueled idea. But then I look at my son and all my kids at Lighthouse, and I see growth, joy, safety, and I realize if I hadn't made that decision, if I'd waited for the perfect time or a perfect plan, none of this would exist. They wouldn't be where they are.

They say that there are moments in life that fundamentally alter your brain chemistry, moments so powerful they split your world into before and after. Most would assume mine was the day my son was diagnosed with autism, but it wasn't. The most profound shift in me didn't come from a label, it came from thousands of quiet heartbreaks; watching people look through my son, walk past him, exclude him as if he's not even human. Daniel, with his amazing spirit, quiet strength, and 'yep,' to every question, will not stand on stages, write policy, or lead revolutions. His autism, paired with intellectual disability, mean the world may never hear him in a way it hears others. But make no mistake, he's a world changer. He changed me, fiercely and permanently.

Because of him, I fight harder, love louder, and I see what others miss. I show up where others stay silent. Every door I've opened, every wall I've torn down, every bold, reckless, and soul-driven decision I've made is because of him. And now I know, with complete certainty, Daniel will continue to try and change the lives of those who can change the world. And this is how revolutions begin, quietly and one heart at a time.

By Brock Weir