



Giving back to women of Edmonton

By AMANDA VELLA

A key phrase for the YWCA of Edmonton is a 'Turning Point for Women.' My own turning point came a few years ago at my first annual general meeting. I was in the middle of an audit that had overwhelmed me to the point where all I could see was numbers.

But a woman in the audience changed all of that. Standing up bravely, she told us that in the depths of her addiction, she had seen an ad for the YWCA, and it had shown her that she was not alone. "You were my last hope," she confided.

I never thought I would be a crying wreck at my first AGM.

The honesty of this woman's story awoke me to the challenges faced by women in Edmonton every day. Many families live in poverty and confront domestic violence. Teenage girls are facing enormous pressures. And there continues to be a lack of women in leadership roles.

Working with an organization that gives women the best shot possible at success was important for me on a very personal level. I'm a chartered accountant and chartered business valuator, but, like many professional women, I didn't start out with the confidence I have today.

As a teenager, I often doubted my abilities and mistakenly listened to people who told me my goals were 'too hard' — including that of becoming a CA. It took until my early 20s to cast off these negative influences and learn to reach my full potential. I did it on my own, but I don't think others should have to. When I joined the board of the YWCA in 2008, my goal was to help empower women in the community so they could stop listening to the naysayers of the world and start living to their potential.

My role on the YWCA board is to provide governance over an approximately \$8 million operating budget which assists over 9,000 people annually with the programming we offer. I'm proud of the fact that our programming helps women build skills for success in the workplace and at home, while never sacrificing fun.

GirlSpace and the Power of Being a Girl Conference are education platforms aimed at preventing violence against women. Lakeside Haven is a retreat for survivors of family violence. YoWoChAs Outdoor Education Center is one of Edmonton's top summer camps where respect of the self, others and of the envi-



Amanda Vella, left, a chartered accountant and chartered business valuator, assists Padre Innocent Inienwe of 1 Combat Engineer Regiment as a 'Lean on Me' volunteer at YWCA of Edmonton's Walk a Mile in Her Shoes event in September. The event raised awareness of violence against women.

ronment is taught. Women of Distinction is an inspirational celebration of women in Edmonton who have made unique and exemplary contributions to the community.

In addition to overseeing accounting on the board, I try to represent the YWCA of Edmonton at many of our events in the community.

Our most recent Walk a Mile in Her Shoes event has done the most to raise our profile. We had over 200 men walk around downtown Edmonton in high heels during a lunch hour in September to raise awareness and funds to stop domestic violence.

It's hard not to pay attention to 200 men walking by in spiky stiletto heels.

I was a 'Lean on Me' volun-

teer, meaning I helped the men — among them media personalities, athletes, police officers, military personal, city councillors and businessmen — hobble (and in some cases walk quite adeptly) to the finish line. The event raised over \$20,000 to help women and families affected by domestic violence.

The support we drew from our community continues to amaze me. We received significant in-kind advertising, underscoring just how committed the community can be when an important cause is being promoted. It's exciting to drive down a street and see a billboard for one of the YWCA's programs. My favourite is an electronic billboard that featured pictures of women that won our Women of Distinction event.

stand. Having this specialized background helped me to bridge the gap between financial and non-financial people who sit on the board.

Recently, I gave a Finance 101 lecture to help board members gain a basic understanding of financial statements. I also practice transparency by providing my monthly treasurer reports in terms that all members will understand.

During the week, I spend about five to 10 hours on board work, fitting it where I can over lunch or on evenings or weekends. Balancing my career and volunteer work can be challenging, but I try to do the best with time I have.

Two years ago, when I was interviewing to be on the board, I was asked if I was OK with being called a feminist. The question gave me pause. I had worked so hard in my career for my male counterparts to see me as an equal that I was a little worried about the perception of being called a feminist.

Unfortunately, I think the word has developed a negative connotation over time. The true premise of being a feminist is working toward equal opportunities for women, which was what I was already doing. When I think of what many women the YWCA serves are going through, I don't think it matters what I am called in the process.

The main point is that people who need assistance are getting it, and becoming stronger and more active members of the community as a result.

Volunteering has added a layer of extra purpose to my life. It has taught me to demand more of myself, and to give more of myself by connecting to the community where I live. It has also put me in touch with strong women leaders in the community who inspire me to become a better leader myself.

This has helped me to become a better advocate as a board member of the YWCA. It has helped me to become better at decision making and thinking 'big' picture in my career as a financial professional. For me, that's simply priceless.

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Being a CA and a CBV turned out to be an advantageous combination for my position on the board. As a CA, you understand accounting policies and as a CBV you have more experience with budgets, cash flow and cash flow projections, skills that are extremely critical for not-for-profits.

Being a CBV has also given me a great deal of corporate finance knowledge that was valuable when the YWCA was updating their investment policy.

Being a CBV also gave me the strong interpretive and communication skills to present my work in a clear manner. Often, as a CBV, you work as an expert on transactions and need to communicate complex issues in a way that your whole team will under-