

# Legend

SEPTEMBER 15, 2020

LEARN FROM  
GENDER EQUALITY QUEEN  
**KELLY COOPER**

AS A YOUTH SHE DECIDED TO  
NEVER ALLOW THE ACTIONS OF  
OTHERS TO DETERMINE HER WORTH.  
SHE NOW CHAMPIONS EQUALITY  
FOR WOMEN GLOBALLY.

## GLOBAL WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

STORIES AND INTERVIEWS OF POWERFUL WOMEN  
WHO CREATED THEIR OWN PATH TO SUCCESS AND  
INSPIRED MILLIONS IN THE PROCESS.

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# KELLY COOPER

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# LEGACY OF KELLY COOPER

## EARLY LIFE

From her first day of struggles entering this world not breathing from severe asthma, Ms. Cooper's early life had its challenges. The youngest of five kids, favoured by her mother because of health issues, being the youngest, and a girl, she was the lightning rod for a lot of jealousy from her siblings that to this day have not ceased. Raised at first in a patriarchal home, and then by a single mom as of the age of 9, Ms. Cooper witnessed and experienced mental and emotional abuse from her family with the exception of her mom.

Ms. Cooper was also bullied in middle school for how she looked and because she came from a divorced home. However, throughout high school she started to take greater control of her life and was actively involved in all sports, achieved grade 8 conservatory music in piano, was on the student's council, always had a job and feels blessed to have had a great boyfriend throughout those years.

Ms. Cooper was always looking for innovative ways to solve problems around her and was determined to not let her past dictate her future. Her strong minded and tenacious personality led her to Canada's best university – the University of Toronto – where she completed her undergraduate studies in the sciences program. She later attended the University of Sussex in England where she completed her MA in International Environment, Development and Policy.

## BEGINNING OF HER CAREER

Ms. Cooper's career has never had a dull moment. She remembers her first

interview with a national engineering consulting firm where the President himself grilled her with a binder full of questions. He was so impressed with her that he said on the spot to a director on his team "hire her now!". This was in 1993 in a male dominated field! Growing up with three older brothers gave Ms. Cooper the skills to speak to men in a manner most women don't usually have. Her quick wit and thick skin allows her to verbally joust with men, giving them the impression that she is one of them. And yet she has the qualities and life experience of a woman.

Although she started out in the world of environmental consulting she was quickly brought into the federal government where she managed cutting-edge files such on issues related to the "global commons" e.g. climate change and oceans. This is where she also first learned about the global issue of gender inequality, its severity and scope in so many aspects all over the world.

Her work took her to developing countries where she witnessed poverty, inequality, and corruption that stirred in her a passion to want to take action. Street smart and attractive, Ms. Cooper navigated these countries unharmed. It was back in Canada however that Ms. Cooper was assaulted in broad daylight. Her story ended well – she chased the young man and through an off-duty police officer witnessing the chase, managed to put that man in jail.

This experience fuelled Ms. Cooper's passion on gender equality and nudged her toward starting her own business. She has recently written a book entitled "Lead the Change – The Competitive Advantage of

Gender Diversity and Inclusion” that targets the C-suite to understand the value proposition of GDI and gives a blueprint for how to take action. It’s an engaging and easy read and leaves you realizing this is a business decision that has real economic returns and is something you are capable of doing. It takes away any fear of the unknown and has you wanting to get started immediately.

Ms. Cooper has used the power of focus and endless determination to succeed as a woman and now she is doing the same for other women.

### **OVERCOMING CHALLENGES AS A WOMAN IN HER FIELD**

Overcoming challenges as a woman in her work started with overcoming challenges as a woman in her personal life. Standing up to her ex, and family members who took advantage of her both financially and emotionally was the beginning of her finding her voice. She started to see the need for boundaries, for accountability, and for clear communication. She has had many bosses, colleagues and potential clients, not to mention headhunters, who have sexually harassed her or eluded to her looks in a sexual manner in the workplace. She has had men in senior positions literally scream at her in her capacity as a female entrepreneur in an effort to get his way on something in an effort to intimidate her in a conversation he had no place even speaking up. To Ms. Cooper, this yelling is akin to a tantrum and it has no place in the work environment. Mutual respect is key to successful relationships and it must be a part of any workplace culture.

### **CAREER HIGHLIGHTS**

- Author of Lead the Change – The Competitive Advantage of Gender Diversity

and Inclusion;

- Spearheaded the Gender Equity in Canada’s Forest Sector National Action Plan – which addresses gender equality across the whole of the sector, creating sustained change;
- Spearheaded Women in Mining National Action Plan across the private corporations in the mining sector in Canada;
- Started her own business called the Centre for Social Intelligence;
- Developed numerous Ministerial decision policy documents of global and national significance including on climate change; oceans; sustainable development; energy projects in the oil and gas sectors; and Indigenous economic development;
- Travelled extensively for work throughout Africa, India, South America, Europe;
- Represented Canada at UN meetings related to sustainable development – led sessions with New York’s financial district and worked with Kofi Annan (Former Secretary General to the United Nations) and Jean Chretien (Canada’s former Prime Minister) for UN meetings;
- Worked in India for 8 months and dined with Ghandi’s grandson and wife;
- Went on a research expedition in Canada’s high arctic for two months to study the Hood river including all environmental science aspects such as land, water, air, and wildlife.

### **LESSONS TO LEARN FROM THE LEGACY OF MS. COOPER**

The life of Ms. Cooper teaches us to stay focused and committed to ourselves and to not let others dictate your destiny. She believes strongly that when you follow your dreams, the whole world conspires to help you. Life will always have its challenges – expect it and be mentally prepared for when it happens and know that failure is not the opposite of success, it’s part of success.

**1. Tell us how CSI came into existence. What were some of the challenges? Road-blocks? And what finally brought it all together?**

I was working my way up the ladder in the public sector and although I had been given a lot of great files, I found myself not enjoying the workplace culture. The senior executives there were not what I aspired to be – they grinded people into the ground with crazy workloads and pressures for work that was certainly not life threatening or requiring ridiculous timelines. It just didn't make sense to work like that. It also stifled creativity. Something that I have a lot of. I like being able to act on my ideas and work on interesting things with interesting people.

I was offered a job in the private sector a few years previously in a public relations firm. So I thought I'd call them up to see if they were still interested. They indeed were, although there was a new boss there that I would be reporting to. I was sure I'd be better off in the private sector given my personality (self-starter, go getter, risk taker) so when the public sector was downsizing due to the economic recession in 2012, I put my hand up to leave. They had a "swap" incentive program for downsizing – which meant for anyone wishing to leave that could find someone who received a pink slip but wanted to stay and were at the same level, we could "swap" – I could get their one year salary pink slip package, and they could get my job and stay in the government. I figured if I could get this arrangement, and have a job lined up in the private sector – I was gone. And the stars indeed did line up. I found someone who qualified for my job and had lined up the job in the PR firm. I clicked my heels right out the door.

It was quite a shock entering the private sector. The new boss at the PR firm spent

several months working out a deal with me and was quite excited about me joining his team. I was brought in on day one, shown to my very nice office and handed a wonderful welcome letter. I was pumped! We had our first team meeting at 10am that first day, and as I was waiting to see where the team lead (ie my boss) was, when I looked up and saw him being ushered out the door carrying a box. I couldn't believe it! He was fired! Day one! This guy was a chief of staff to many Cabinet Ministers and a seasoned and experienced man. That experience put fire in my shoes and I quickly learned I was in a shark tank. I had been forewarned prior to joining that the guy leading that office was quite a difficult and ruthless man. And he proved that out. The man running the company across Canada was also located in our office. He took a big shine to me. I had depth of knowledge on the environment and on Indigenous matters given the files I had in the government. I also was good at putting together briefings for meetings. This man quickly had me working on hot files like an energy pipeline project that was spearheaded out west. Because of this fast connection with the Canada boss, I quickly had all eyes on me and people starting to get their daggers out. The trouble was the Canada boss didn't run the local office and so I had no cover. I even had the chairman of the company coming to my office regularly and being so comfortable with me that he'd put his feet up on my desk and ask me questions about things. I essentially had the top two players for Canada liking me. They'd take me out for high power lunches and insist I was on high flying files. But unfortunately, within three months, the Canada boss moved to the Australia office and the Chairman had no say in day-to-day matters. I had just told my new direct report that I was getting a divorce. So it was quite a shock when the daggers came out and I was let go. I was a threat to the guy leading that office.

I was making in-roads far too quickly with some influential people and that did not sit well with him. At that point, I was dumped into a saturated job market with others that were given pink slips from the government downsizing. I had two little kids and to make matters worse, my mother had a stroke and we had her on life support. She ended up incapacitated for the next 5 years at my sisters request as she was the power of attorney for my mother's health and wanted to keep her alive, albeit in a non-living state. It was a very dark and lonely time for me. My ex took half my salary package that I received when I left the public sector even though I definitely needed it. My father told me to get a loan, no family support was ever shown with my kids, so I was at an all-time scramble and low. I had to dig deep into my toenails to figure out how to get back on track with work and be solid for my kids.

While in the PR firm, I was approached by a head-hunter company. There was a great opportunity for my consideration. So, when I was fired, I decided to pursue that. I had to put together a big presentation, they flew me to Toronto, and I presented to a 4-person board. Three weeks later I was offered the job! It was awesome! I was going to be fine! But then they informed me that I'd have to move to Toronto. Their initial talk about that was that I could remain in Ottawa and set up an office for them there. With the divorce, I was in no position to be moving out of town. So, I had to turn it down.

From there I started hunting hard for work. I made up business cards and signed up for a big conference I knew about in the mining sector. I flew myself to Toronto and worked the halls of the conference for contracts. After a few weeks, I cold called an organization that I subsequently learned was needing help with fundraising. I knew I could do that so I agreed to the contract opportunity

they presented. I had one week to come up with an idea for women in mining and figure out the proposal process for applying to the federal government grant opportunity. I pulled together 14 mining companies that wrote letters of support, I wrote up the proposal, and submitted it all in 7 working days. It was crazy! They found out they got the funding a few months later and then turned to me to ask if I'd like to run the project for them. By then I had secured other employment in the public sector – in fact they had me in a competition to return full-time at the same level I left and with the same number of holidays. So, I kept that day job and started doing the women in mining project on the side. Those two jobs combined with my two kids and a very difficult divorce from someone whose main objective was to make my life hard – was a wild time for me. I also had a house out in the country and one downtown that I was responsible for sharing the expenses on – I had to rent out the country place to keep costs in check. You are getting the highlights here but suffice it to say that the years 2012-14 were very difficult.

I had to make a choice about returning to the government or staying in the private sector. With kids in tow, I decided the best place was in the private sector, so I could juggle my hours according to their needs.

So that's how I got into gender diversity and inclusion work! From there I was approached to do other similar work. So, I started out as Cooper Consulting and then rebranded the name to the Centre for Social Intelligence (CSI).

CSI actually started out as having three pillars of work – mental health, gender diversity and youth. But that quickly changed because it was tackling too much all at once. These three issues were what I thought the world needed focusing on. . The Canadian

government made gender equality a policy imperative in 2015 and with that focused pressure from the feds, I was able to generate work opportunities in the private sector.

Challenges – many challenges as a female entrepreneur! I've had to be very efficient with my time to generate opportunities while managing my home life. Because I got divorced at the same time as leaving the public sector, I had a lot of balls to juggle on all fronts. I knew however, that my determination and energy would surpass my current circumstances and I'd be happier with leaving the public sector and marriage in search of greater balance and happiness.

Roadblocks – My biggest challenge with getting my business going has been getting my name out there. When people see what I'm doing they say, "that's so cool" and then they want to know more. Generating leads on this topic has been tough but it's getting better.

What brought it all together? It's an ongoing thing – I build off of each project I do and gain more knowledge and skills along the way to help organizations. I didn't seek out this career, it found me. And I am going with the flow – sometimes life just takes you to unexpected places and you have to be willing to walk through the door.

I've recently written a book entitled *Lead the Change – The Competitive Advantage of Gender Diversity and Inclusion* and that has helped solidify my brand and image. It also gives me deeper credibility and let's others know I'm committed to this topic and have knowledge and experience to impart. I'm now setting up a podcast and I'm already getting calls for business opportunities as a result of the book.

## **2. Living in 2020, the world is changing fast. How do you see CSI meeting the unique challenges facing the world today?**

We live in uncertain times – in terms of our health (physical and mental), wealth and our social fabric. Increasing gender equality in organizations increases the bottom line of any organization and addresses many of these uncertainties. The business case is clear on that. By eliminating the glass ceiling, women are able to seek and attain senior positions and become decision makers. Women tend to play the long game with business decisions, see the impacts of decisions beyond the organization to the communities, and to the families. That lens on decision making is a game changer for society. CSI guides leaders through the value proposition of gender equality and then works with them to map out a sustainable path forward on moving the organization toward a more inclusive workplace culture, respectful of all genders and ethnicities.

It's not realistic to think the world can be run by white males as it has been for some time. That's a thing of the past. Immigration has created new cultural dynamics for Canada, and we have to integrate these cultures in a respectful and smooth way so that everyone has an opportunity to have a healthy and successful life. Women have to become part of the workforce in a meaningful way to allow companies to compete in a global market. You're missing a considerable perspective if you don't onboard how products and services affect women. Same goes for the health industry – majority of research has been focused on men and impacts to them. Funding needs to go toward women and how they are affected.



### **3. Despite seeing global inequality, why are you hopeful that CSI will have a positive impact on the globe? What steers such hope?**

I'm an eternal optimist. I believe how we frame the conversation on gender equality is key to seeing it realized. Men can't be seen as the problem. They have to be seen as the solution. I believe strongly that men have a lot to gain from gender equality – less heart attacks, less suicide, greater social cohesion as well as sharing of household expenses which reduces stress and anxiety. When I speak with men about this issue through this lens, I get interest and curiosity to learn more. And the more they are engaged in conversation, the more likely they will be to take action.

What steers my hope is when I speak with men who have worked and lived in privileged situations looking at me with the "oh, now I get it" look in their eyes, I think "yes! I'm making a difference!". And for young women who currently are in school and don't even see why this is a conversation let alone a career path for me. I was there once myself. I had no idea just how things were in the work world until I got there. Having graduated from the best University in Canada (University of Toronto) in the science program as a young woman, I just thought I could do anything and there was nothing or anyone who would be stopping me. I thought the same even after obtaining my master's degree from the University of Sussex in the UK. But I learned later on that there are pay gaps between women, limitations for upward mobility opportunities, sexual harassment and issues with being perceived as aggressive instead of assertive. It was an eye opener for me. Anyway, for these young women, I want a level playing field for their worlds. If they want to aspire to be more, then nobody should be in their way. People can have enough of their own self-doubts that can

trip them up that we don't need other roadblocks in the way. All to say I am hopeful for the future for the young women and can see companies and governments putting women in leadership roles which will allow these young women to have role models. A key ingredient in women taking these jobs is having role models.

### **4. How are you helping companies meet the challenges facing the world of tomorrow as it relates to gender equality? How are you preparing them for success and helping them create a brighter future for women and the community?**

I help companies on many levels. First, I work with them to explain the business case – or as I like to call it the business advantage. I work with the executive team to understand why this is important to their bottom line. I facilitate a discussion on where they want the company to be in 3-5 years. And from there I work with their individual context to provide options on how to get to their end goal in that time period. Options are based on resources – both financial and human – that they are willing to invest. Each financial option has corresponding outcomes. This helps them kick start their company on this issue and sets them up for success. I then help them determine what indicators they want to measure over time. For some companies this can be internal changes such as number of women in decision making roles. For other companies they may extend to the external audience realm and look at the ways in which they interact with the community such as hiring female led subcontracting companies. It's different for each company. Any company that works on GDI will increase their brand and image, thereby attracting the best and brightest.

**5. Without giving away any company secrets, what are fundamental strategies and characteristics you help companies and employees develop through your organization and how do you go about ensuring that they develop such qualities?**

There are three things that I go on about with executives – they need a leadership strategy, an HR strategy, and a communications strategy – all working cooperatively across the organization. This approach will streamline things and make everything happen more efficiently. It's like a full court press to the company on gender diversity and inclusion and there's no turning the dial back. How I go about getting these strategies in place is through coaching the most senior executive in charge. That individual makes or breaks the plan and outcome that is implemented. If they are on board, sustained change will occur in the workplace culture. There are multiple avenues to affect change that I do after the leadership is engaged. It's always exciting to watch people have the "aha" moment on why they need to do this. Then they can't be stopped!

**6. How important is company accountability as it relates to ensuring gender equality and inclusion?**

Very important! In fact, you've touched on the cornerstone of this work. Without accountability, you have a bunch of mumbo jumbo talk. Employees will think of this as just a passing thing and it won't get anywhere. I talk about going from vision to action and then from action to traction. Accountability is key to getting traction.

**7. What has been the greatest achievement of CSI?**

CSI led the charge on the first public

private national sector wide strategy in one of the toughest sectors on gender equality – in the forest sector. I came up with this idea back in 2016 and sought and secured well over half a million dollars to implement this action plan. It involved seeking a forest organization (the Canadian Institute of Forestry) so I'd have a front face to the forest sector as my partner and together we brought the public, private, not-for-profit, academia and Indigenous representatives across the forest sector to work collaboratively on gender equality. We are now in our third year of this project and we have made some amazing strides in raising awareness, bringing together data on this issue (because what gets tracked gets attained); creating innovative tools and best practices for an inclusive culture and repositioning the sector through strategic communications. This sector wide approach has inspired many companies to take on gender strategies in their own organizations. I hope to do similar projects in other sectors like IT. I have a great idea for the IT sector that would be fantastic to implement for them and for the world. They have to get in touch with me!

The other accomplishment is my recent book entitled *Lead the Change – The competitive advantage of gender diversity and inclusion*. It is a handy and comprehensive book that provides any change agent with why they need to do this in their organization and how to go about it effectively. It provides the value proposition and a blueprint for how to take action. How to be the change, make the change and leverage the change...into dollars. I've received amazing testimonials on the book from senior executives in leading companies on this topic and it is a must have for any executive looking to make things happen. Go to amazon or my website at [www.centre-forsocialintelligence.ca](http://www.centre-forsocialintelligence.ca) to learn more about it!

## **8. What unique rewards have companies received by working with CSI?**

Companies that work with CSI feel supported and that there is the possibility for change to occur. Gender equality work is like running a marathon. It's not a sprint. And those looking to make change have to realize it takes time. Those who work with CSI feel the wind is behind their backs and they can achieve the outcomes they are looking for.

## **9. What unique rewards have companies received after taking the CSI Gender Gap Audit Assessment?**

The gender gap audit assessment lines companies up for being certified with gender equality in the workplace certification. Certification is given according to certain indicators being met at different levels. Companies can then use this as part of their branding – to say “hey, we are on the ball on gender diversity and inclusion and we have a workplace culture that is thriving!” – they can then attract the best and brightest which then fuels innovation and strengthens the bottom line.

## **10. The CSI is your legacy to the world Ms Cooper. Why?**

I think the big difference that CSI is making is that we are explaining the value proposition of GDI to leaders and decision makers in a common-sense way – essentially showing the economics of a social issue. Senior executives still grapple with knowing why they need to do something on this topic. The key business driver is the bottom line to these guys. So, by explaining it in dollars and cents, they then realize that in order to remain competitive, they have to do something. It's no longer a bottom tiered “nice to do” priority – it quickly becomes a top priority. We live in very competitive global economy and when leaders

figure out that GDI is a business advantage, they are on it like straight away.

Second to explaining the value proposition is providing a blueprint for action on how to go about it. The “how” has been very confusing to most people – my book explains how to do it in very clear and simple language. Leaders won't want to act on anything unless they have a pretty good sense that it's going to work out favourably. The fear of failure can often overtake some leaders from doing anything. My book *Lead the Change – The Competitive Advantage of Gender Diversity and Inclusion* gives them the path forward so that they can feel confident doing this and be guaranteed success. The book also provides examples of leading-edge companies that have acted on GDI and provides the return on their investment. Sodexo for example claims a \$15 return on their investment from implementing a GDI strategy. Who can argue with that kind of economic gain? If you know this is possible and you still don't act, then you are showing weak business acumen as far as I'm concerned.

## **11. How has covid-19 impacted CSI and your interactions with companies? What changes has your organization had to make in order to continue to effect a positive change while simultaneously keeping employees safe?**

It's changed things considerably. I have to zoom call with everyone just like everybody else and it gets tiring. I'm much more of a people person and I get energy from talking to others so zoom puts a damper on that. At CSI we have eliminated our face to face meetings and stopped attending conferences and making speeches. It's now all on zoom!

## **12. Your company clearly embraces diversity. How important has that been in ensuring your organizations success?**

It's key to our success. I believe strongly that all women of colour, indigenous and new immigrants should have equal access to opportunities. Although I'm a white woman, I respect and appreciate other cultures immensely. I traveled extensively in my 20's to Africa, India, Thailand, South America and Europe – in both a professional and personal capacity. Those experiences shaped my thinking and have allowed me to see that everyone should be granted equal status and allowed to pursue their aspirations – all deserving of a good quality of life – at work and at home.

## **13. What are key ways organizations can work with the CSI?**

There are a number of ways organizations can work with CSI:

\* Executive coaching - Decision makers in today's corporate world are often confused about where to start any effort on gender diversity and inclusion (GDI). Executive Leadership Coaching provides strategic advice that will set a solid and sustainable course for success. It is a 3-step process that once implemented, will give assurance that not only this is the right thing to do, but necessary to position your organization to be more competitive and profitable in the current global market. It includes data gathering, one on one interviews and a presentation to the Executive team on options going forward.

\* Gender gap audit assessment – Companies looking to see what indicators they should be addressing and where they stand on these indicators relative to a certification standard on Gender Equality in the Workplace should conduct this assessment. This will

provide a benchmark for companies on various thematic issues including equal pay for equivalent work; recruitment and promotion; leadership development training & mentoring; flexible working and company culture.

\* Gender diversity and inclusion strategy – This strategy picks up where the audit assessment left off. CSI works closely with the change agent/gender champion in the company to develop a comprehensive strategy that takes the organization from where they are now to where they want to be. It includes leadership; HR and Communications branches working collaboratively to implement various actions.

\* National Sector Action Plans – Approaching gender diversity and inclusion on a sector wide basis is an effective way to engage all stakeholders in the sector on this topic. Funding is sought from public and private organizations and CSI strategically identifies public, private, not-for-profit, Indigenous and academia representatives to work collaboratively across the sector to address the gaps on GDI in that sector. Through this approach, the whole of the sector is engaged and becomes aware of the benefits of pursuing GDI in their organization. Knowledge and best practices are shared and implemented through each of the representatives that make up a national sector steering committee which in turn educate and reach out to their own networks for further dissemination of knowledge and skills development. In 3-5 years, big changes occur across the whole sector.

## **14. Tell us more about how you grew up. How do you think youth influenced your career path? Take as much time and space you need to answer this question.**

I can see now that the struggles I've had in my upbringing have given me the strength of

character to pursue work in this GDI space. At the time though I thought the stork must have left me at the wrong address. My parents married quite young and immediately started a family. They were both smart people – my father skipped two grades and my mother skipped one grade. My dad went on to be a successful actuary. Although they had high IQ's, they were a little short on EQ skills – such as empathy, impulse control, self-awareness etc. Those skills are critical ingredients to raising a healthy family in my opinion.

I grew up in a patriarchal home with a stay at home mom until I was 9. I had three older brothers and an older sister. Two of my brothers were 10 and 12 years older than me and as a result, it was like I had a three-headed father. I didn't see my dad more than twice a year since I was 9 when my parents divorced. Back in the 1980's, divorce was rare, and people judged you a lot for coming from a divorced family. It was a tough time for me, and I suffered a lot of anxiety with the disruption of the divorce.

After the divorce, my mom moved us back to Canada and my dad stayed in the US. (We are all from Canada originally, but my dad got a promotion to the US when I was 7 years old and he never left). My brothers were in Canada and played an influential role in the fatherly role/influence. Unfortunately, there was a lot of jealousy in my household. As I was the youngest of 5 kids, and a girl, plus I was born severely asthmatic (put in an incubator at birth) and was regularly rushed to the hospital as a baby, my mom paid more attention to me. I later learned how my siblings grew to really resent me for all those reasons. My eldest brother was pretty harsh toward me and would tell me consistently and frequently that I was ugly and would never make it in the world. He apologized to me when I was in my 40's for this but of course

the damage had been done. My second eldest brother quipped up a line that stuck like glue in the family and for as long as I can remember which was "my mother had five kids, Kelly, Kelly, Kelly, Kelly and Kelly." My sister, who is almost 8 years older than me, I think would have preferred if I was put in a garbage can when I was born. The limelight shifted from her to me and she didn't like that. I can't recall her ever giving me guidance or support in a way you think an older sister would. In fact when I recently married three years ago for the second time she told me (with having 6 months' notice) that she didn't have the time or the money to come, even though the wedding was only a 3-hour drive away. And that she had been to my first wedding so felt no need. Her attitude toward me has been consistent that way. I had another brother who was 2 years older than me and we were like peas and carrots growing up. So, it was extra hard for me when he took his life in his early 30's. His death was an outward manifestation of the internal struggles our family was facing. It was devastating to me and no words can impart how I felt and still feel. I think of him every day and often drift off thinking about what life would have been like if he was still with us.

I was also picked on a lot in school from grades 6-8. I would have stomach aches every morning before going to school and felt horrible from the verbal chastising, I received. My mom went back to school when I was 9 years old. She wanted to be a nurse. She got as far as being a nursing assistant while working part-time in a kitchen at a restaurant. When I was 12, she took a night shift nursing job. I remember vividly that she would lock the door at 10:45pm and return at 7:15am in time to get us up and going to school. My brother was 14 at the time and would take this opportunity to go out – (usually hopped out his window) to do whatever. I was left at home and frequently

experienced night terrors. I remember screaming myself awake many times.

When it was time to go to university, I had considerable pressure from my parents to stay in my hometown. There was a very reputable university there – the University of Western Ontario – my father went there, and both of my older brothers did too, and of course my mom didn't want me leaving her city. By this time my sister had had challenges with teen pregnancy and was pregnant again in her mid-twenties, but this time decided to keep the baby. My brother that was two years older than me was sent to a Christian college – where he met a girl and got her pregnant. They ended up putting that baby up for adoption. When my brother died, I was determined to find his daughter, which I did just last year. It was amazing to meet her – now in her 30's with her own family. Anyway, I was not interested in staying in my hometown. I saw university as my ticket out. At first, I wanted to go live with my dad in Atlanta which I did for a couple of months (I finished high school in 4.5 years instead of 5 – these were the days of grade 13). So, I took those extra months to go to the States where we scouted out Emory and Duke university. However, the price tag for those schools was considerable and when I was accepted to the University of Toronto (to which I applied prior to going to the US), I decided to go there. It's Canada's best university and I was accepted to the science program. So I returned to Canada and went into residence in Toronto. My dad was in his second marriage (of three marriages) and at that time his wife was quite jealous of my time there with my dad. It was a confusing and unhealthy situation for me, so it was best that I returned to Canada.

All of these experiences leading up to my days in university were riddled with feelings of unworthiness, self-doubt, anxiety, con

fusion and uncertainty. In spite of that though, during my high school years I always had a job, was on many team sports with school, on the city swim team, student's council and in the band as well as playing piano up to the grade 8 conservatory level. I also had a great boyfriend who treated me like a queen. My mom was for sure my number one fan and I'm thankful to have had her although she too had her issues mostly with alcohol. She would often pour herself a drink at cocktail hour, lay out all the ingredients for dinner and direct me on how to make dinner. I remember that starting at 12 years old.

I had to develop a thick skin as they say – I had two choices – either follow my siblings' way of being or carve out my own path. I didn't have any role models that I recall that stood out. Going away for university, going into science, breaking from the family pack, these were all big deal decisions for me. I eventually learned to find my voice within my family dynamics. I challenged their behaviours, I stood up for myself. And that is what I do now with my work – I inspire young women to do more, be more, and to know they only have themselves to get out of the way of their own success. My thick skin also has allowed me to stand up for myself with men in the workplace – be it for equal pay; sexual harassment; or really unprofessional conduct (eg. yelling at me to get their own way – true story – just happened this year!). I am not a wall flower and I am not dumb. I've been told repeatedly that this combination can intimidate people, but I see that as a them problem, not a me problem.

I believe people should be held accountable for their behaviour. And that there should be a safe space to raise concerns. I have tried endlessly with my siblings but to no avail. It is sad because I came from a family of 7 people and I am now just down

to me. When my parents died in 2018 – one in Sept suddenly (my father) and my mom in November (I was alone by her bedside and watched her pass – it was traumatic to witness!) – it pulled the final rug out from me in terms of connection to my siblings. Their behaviours around those deaths were way out there – from my eldest brother threatening suicide, to my other brother not attending my mom’s funeral.

I was the executor of my mom’s will and in spite of things being spelled out in black and white, my sister presented challenges at every turn with the Will. It was a very hard time. I appreciate grief affects everyone differently, but these are just a couple of difficult scenarios that occurred. There were many more incidents that accumulated and led me to throw in the towel on staying in touch. When you keep banging your head against the wall with people and nothing changes, eventually you realize you just have to stop banging your head. Not having difficult people in your life frees up your energy and mind to explore positive people and experiences. It took me a long time to let go, mostly because these are the people that had a shared memory of my deceased brother and I wanted connection on that. But it was clear that I was better off on my own.

Memories of my youth are not very positive. They formed who I am though, and I have worked hard and diligently to course correct my own chattering monkeys inside my head to overcome early messaging from family. I think the difficult environment that I grew up in led me to marrying the wrong guy the first go around. The good news though is that I have two wonderful kids. My friends have told me to write a book about my life and call it the Phoenix! There are endless stories to share but I don’t think people would believe them to be true!

I am where I am now which is a very happy and healthy place, however, I still struggle some days with being good enough. I have written a new tape for myself in my head when I struggle – I say to myself “look at all you’ve accomplished, look at your marriage now, look at your kids and your life – you have worked hard to have these wonderful things happen! Don’t give up!”

I’ve taken these difficult experiences, learned from them and realized I can use them as a source of strength to move forward, not just for myself but for others. I’d rather be a role model for others and my kids, than a woe-is-me person who just dwells in their own self-pity. I have put a few expressions on my fridge for my kids to read daily – one reads “belief alters biology” and another - “we are not victims of heredity, but masters of it.” I’m constantly telling my kids that we have to be grateful for what we have on so many levels. Life is full of curve balls, and we have to have the coping skills in place to deal with them. The other expression I have on the fridge is “life is working for you, not against you!” I believe this whole-heartedly – sometimes though it’s hard to see the long game when you’re going through a tough time.

