

Telling the stories of remarkable women in the Okanagan

I AM WOMAN

MAR
2026

STRENGTH
IN DETAIL

19
WOMEN

DRIVING IMPACT IN
LOCAL BUSINESS,
NON-PROFITS, AND
EVERYDAY LIFE.



SHIVANI
SHARMA

LEADERSHIP AND BUILDING TRUST
IN THE LEGAL WORLD

Editor's Letter

This publication is about women claiming space, in their work, their lives, and their voice.

These pages were shaped by women who are building, balancing, questioning, creating, and becoming. Women who are doing it all in their own way — raising families, running businesses, serving their communities, starting over, speaking up, and learning to trust themselves along the way. What connects these stories is not perfection, but presence.

Within these pages, you'll find resilience, vulnerability, and quiet strength. You'll read about women finding their voice, sometimes for the first time, and sometimes in a new season of life. Their paths are layered and real, filled with pivots, self-doubt, growth, and moments of bravery that don't always come with recognition, but matter deeply all the same.

This publication is a reflection of modern womanhood. One that holds ambition and care, confidence and uncertainty, independence and connection, often all at once. These stories remind us that there is no single way to show up as a woman, and no timeline for becoming who you are meant to be.

What remains constant is our commitment to creating space for women to be seen, heard, and celebrated. To share stories that inspire connection, confidence, and courage and remind us that none of us are doing this alone.

We hope these pages leave you feeling inspired, encouraged, and a little more confident in your own voice.



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Suzette Ritchie

CARRYING HER FORWARD: SUZETTE RITCHIE ON FRIENDSHIP, LEGACY, AND HONOURING A LIFE LIVED BOLDLY

Some women leave behind more than memories. They leave behind a way of living, a standard of excellence, a relentless work ethic, and a heart big enough to hold everyone around them.

For Suzette Ritchie, International Women's Day will forever carry a deeper meaning. March 8 is not only a global celebration of women, it is also the day her best friend, business partner, and chosen family, Gayle Hunter, passed away.

This story is written in Gayle's honour.

Suzette and Gayle's friendship spanned more than 20 years, beginning long before real estate ever entered their lives. They worked together in the hospitality industry at McDonald's for over a decade, where Gayle's leadership was unmistakable. Bold, confident, and endlessly capable, she had a gift for lifting others up, especially Suzette, whom she mentored into management and encouraged long before Suzette believed in herself.

"GAYLE WAS A FORCE," SUZETTE SAYS. BIG PERSONALITY. BIG HEART. SHE WAS THE KIND OF WOMAN PEOPLE FOLLOWED."

While Suzette eventually stepped away to start a family, Gayle took a leap of her own, and made the courageous decision to pursue real estate; she approached it the same way she approached everything, with grit, determination, and a work ethic that set her apart. She studied while working full-time, balancing responsibilities most people would find overwhelming. And when she entered the industry, she didn't just find success. She built a legacy.

That legacy would eventually take shape as Gayle Hunter and Associates, a team built on trust, high standards, and genuine care.

For Gayle, it was never about volume alone; it was about relationships, about doing the work well, and doing it with heart.

Her career was marked by consistent excellence, reflected in the many accolades she earned:

- 2016: Sales Achievement Award
- 2017–2020: Diamond Award
- 2021: Red Diamond Award
- 2022: Executive Circle
- 2023: Ruby Award

But awards only tell part of the story.

Gayle's true accomplishment was the way she made people feel. She had a rare ability to make others feel seen, valued, and cared for. She took care of everyone else's needs before her own: clients, colleagues, friends, and especially her family.

Her daughter captured it perfectly at her service: "God works hard, but Gayle Hunter works harder."

Anyone who knew Gayle knew how true that was. She was always on the phone, always on an appointment, always showing up for someone. But no matter how busy she was, her family always came first. Her five grandchildren were her world; her family, and a close circle of friends knew a kind of unconditional love that only Gayle could give.

When Gayle was diagnosed with aggressive triple-negative breast cancer in 2022, she fought with the same determination she brought to every part of her life. Even during treatment, she stayed connected to her clients, her business, and the people she cared for. She refused to let illness define her or diminish her commitment.

And when the time came to focus on her health and her family, she made a choice rooted in trust and love: She placed her clients, one of her greatest accomplishments, into Suzette's hands.

It was not a handover of necessity, but of intention. A passing of something precious to someone she believed in.

Today, Suzette continues her real estate career not as a replacement but as a continuation of Gayle's work. Every client she serves, every relationship she nurtures, every act of care is a reflection of the values Gayle lived by.

In honour of Gayle, Suzette plans to support a foundation being created by Gayle's daughter, dedicating a portion of her commissions to causes that reflect Gayle's compassion, strength, and generosity.

Gayle Hunter may be gone, but she is not absent.

She lives on, in the woman she believed in, and the legacy she helped build.



Kristina Loewen

Kelowna Centre MLA

FINDING HER VOICE: KRISTINA LOEWEN ON CALLING, SERVICE, AND PROTECTING COMMUNITY

Kristina Loewen was elected as the MLA for Kelowna Centre in 2024; a path she never would have imagined just a few years earlier. She describes her younger self as insecure at times but wanting to make a difference. Leadership wasn't something that she set out to pursue, but it came naturally. In Adulthood, her focus was on raising children rather than building a career. Today, Kristina stands in one of the most visible and demanding roles in public life - grounded, genuine, and deeply committed to the safety and well-being of her community.

Her path into politics was not planned or predictable. It was built through lived experience, a calling towards service, and a deep commitment to her community. Over the years, Kristina has built a career rooted in people, not power. She worked in real estate, helping families take meaningful steps toward stability and security. Before that, she was a doula, supporting women and families through some of the most vulnerable and transformative moments of their lives. At every stage, a common thread quietly wove its way through her work: empowerment.



"For a society to be healthy, we have to talk about what's working and what's not," she says.

"AVOIDING HARD CONVERSATIONS DOES NOT PROTECT PEOPLE. ADDRESSING THEM DOES."

As a mother of four, three daughters and a son, Kristina's advocacy is deeply personal. She wants a city where families feel safe, where businesses can thrive, and where doing the right thing is rewarded, not punished. Her vision is rooted in restoration, a return to trust, accountability, and compassion balanced with responsibility.

Despite working in a traditionally male-dominated arena, Kristina does not define herself by being a woman in politics. She simply shows up, does the work, and leads with integrity. Her confidence today comes not from titles, but from purpose. She knows why she is here.

When asked what advice she would give to women who feel unsure of their voice, her answer is simple: Start somewhere.

"Do something," she says. "Any step forward leads to the next one. You do not need the full picture. You just need to move."

It is about growth, courage, and answering a call, even when it feels uncomfortable. From humble beginnings to a confident community servant, she is living proof that empowerment is not something we wait for. It is something we choose, again and again, until the world begins to change with us.



"Empowered women empower women," Kristina says, a phrase that has guided her for years. As a doula, it meant helping parents make informed, confident choices. As a REALTOR®, it meant guiding clients through major life transitions with clarity and trust. Today, as an MLA, it means giving a voice to residents, business owners, and families who feel unheard.

Kristina's choice to enter public service did not appear overnight. It was built over time, shaped by life experience, and the desire to lift others up. Over the years, encouragement from trusted voices, including her family, mentors, friends, and her faith, helped her step forward even when the path was unclear.

"I never set out saying I wanted to be an MLA," she explains. "I just kept doing the next right thing."

That willingness to act, rather than wait for others, ultimately led her into politics. A desire to see real action became a sense of responsibility to champion change for the better in the direction society was heading. This included addressing rising crime, declining affordability, and growing concerns around safety. Kristina saw families struggling, business owners exhausted, and neighbourhoods changing rapidly. She felt compelled to speak up and to act.

Today, crime and safety have become central to her work. Kristina is direct about the reality facing her community of Kelowna - a city that she loves, filled with incredible people and businesses, yet one grappling with serious challenges. She believes honesty is essential and that communities cannot heal what they refuse to acknowledge.

Janine Thompson

Counselling with Janine

LESSONS IN GROWTH, FROM THE FOREST TO THE THERAPY ROOM

Janine's path into counselling didn't begin in an office or a classroom. It began outdoors, deep in the forests of British Columbia, working in reforestation and silviculture. Drawn to the land by a desire for purpose and positive impact, she spent years immersed in ecosystems, observing how everything is connected, how damage and regeneration can exist side by side, and how long-term care matters more than quick fixes.

Looking back, she sees now how naturally that work led her here.

"Forests are systems," Janine explains. "Nothing exists in isolation. What affects one part affects the whole." That understanding of interdependence, resilience, and repair became the foundation of how she now works with people.

Life, however, shifted her direction. Becoming a single mother meant that long, remote forestry contracts were no longer sustainable. She needed work that kept her closer to home, and she needed it to matter. Her lifelong curiosity about people, combined with her systems-based way of thinking, led her toward social work.

Janine's academic journey was anything but linear. She began with a social work diploma grounded in sociology and grassroots feminist organizing, eventually completing an undergraduate degree that included an international practicum, one that saw her homeschooling her children overseas while continuing her studies. She later earned her Master of Social Work, focusing her graduate research on Participatory Action Research (PAR) and the importance of culturally appropriate, community-based services.

That work opened the door to Alberta Health Services and then Interior Health Services, where Janine began counselling in addictions and mental health. Over time, her practice evolved toward mental health and trauma, including intergenerational trauma and experiences of abuse. It is work that demands presence, empathy, and stamina, and Janine is honest about the toll it can take.

"This work can be hard," she says. "There's burnout, self-doubt, and moments where you question if you're doing enough."

What keeps her grounded is a conscious willingness to hold two truths at once: that the world can be incredibly painful, and also deeply beautiful. Both exist simultaneously.

Outside of sessions, Janine practices what she teaches. She leans on friends, spends time outdoors, stays active, and returns again and again to the grounding techniques she offers her clients. She draws strength from witnessing the courage of the people she works with, those actively choosing growth so they do not repeat patterns from their past.

Much of Janine's perspective has been shaped by lived experience. As a single mother raising a son on the autism spectrum, she understands what it means to feel stretched beyond capacity. When asked what advice she would give to a single working mother in a difficult season, her response is gentle and practical.

"Break things down," she says. "Focus on what you can control. Sole parenting is impossibly demanding. Parenting is the work of many people."

She encourages women to trust themselves, to recognize that doing their best in any given moment is enough, and to notice the small, meaningful moments along the way.

That theme of self-trust shows up often in Janine's work, especially with women. She has noticed how frequently women minimize their own knowledge and capabilities, something she admits to struggling with herself. With a laugh, she suggests women could use the audacity and self-confidence of a middle-aged white man, pointing out how often authority is claimed without question.

"Women know more than they think they do," she says. "They just don't always believe it."

Janine's therapeutic approach is collaborative at its core. While her website lists a wide range of specialties, her heart lies with people who have experienced marginalization and trauma. She offers a complimentary half-hour consultation because, in her view, the relationship matters more than any specific modality.

"The client is the expert in their own life," she says. "And if it doesn't feel like the right fit, that's okay. Trust that instinct."

For those who have been holding off on counselling, Janine offers reassurance rather than pressure. Starting therapy does not mean something is wrong with you. It simply means you are curious about yourself, your patterns, and your capacity for healing, much like tending a forest, one thoughtful step at a time.



Shivani Sharma

STRENGTH IN DETAIL: SHIVANI SHARMA ON LEADERSHIP AND BUILDING TRUST IN THE LEGAL WORLD



For Shivani Sharma, law is not just about documents, deadlines, or signatures. It is about people, their milestones, their families, and the trust they place in someone during some of life's most important moments.

As a Notary Public in Kelowna, Shivani leads Shivani Sharma Notary Corporation, an all-women practice focused on real estate conveyancing, personal planning, and legal notarizations. From helping a first-time homebuyer complete their purchase to guiding families through wills and estate planning, her work sits at the intersection of precision and care.

"Our office is intentionally calm," Shivani says. "People often come to us feeling overwhelmed or unsure. It's our responsibility to slow things down and make sure they truly understand what they're signing."

That philosophy extends beyond Shivani herself. While she is the sole notary with signing authority, she is quick to acknowledge that success is never achieved alone. Her practice is supported by an experienced, detail-driven team with deep knowledge across conveyancing, personal planning, client services, and administrative coordination. Together, they create an environment clients consistently describe as thoughtful, respectful, and thorough.

Client understanding is central to Shivani's approach. She ensures no one feels rushed or pressured, particularly when emotions run high or legal language feels intimidating. Whether a client is anxious, frustrated, or unfamiliar with the process, Shivani and her team take the time to walk through each detail carefully.

"In real estate, small details matter," she explains. "A title restriction or covenant can have long-term implications. Our job is to catch those details and make sure clients are informed before they commit."

Education and transparency also play a critical role in how Shivani builds trust. She often addresses common misconceptions, such as when clients believe adding a close family member, especially a son or daughter, to a property title is a "simple signing." In reality, these decisions carry significant legal, financial, and estate consequences. When a matter falls outside her scope, Shivani is upfront and directs clients to the appropriate professional, even when it means turning work away.

"That honesty is what builds long-term relationships," she says. "Clients appreciate knowing you're acting in their best interest."

Personal planning is another area where Shivani sees frequent misunderstandings. Many people assume wills can wait until later in life, but she strongly encourages early preparation, especially once assets or children are involved. Appointing guardians for minor children, naming executors, and planning ahead can prevent unnecessary stress during already difficult times.

Shivani puts her clients' best interests first. She encourages contracts to be reviewed before major decisions are made, watches closely for situations where someone may feel pressured, especially seniors, and avoids shortcuts that could compromise trust.

Growth, for Shivani, is intentional. Her long-term goal is to expand by bringing on another staff notary, allowing the practice to serve more people without compromising quality. Much of her business growth has come through word-of-mouth referrals, a reflection of consistency, trust, and performance.

In April 2025, she reached a major milestone by moving her practice into a larger office space in Landmark 6. The central location offers easy access without the challenges of parking, reinforcing her commitment to client comfort and convenience.

Recognized with the Stanley J. Nicol Award for Notarial Practice and fluent in English, Hindi, and Punjabi, Shivani brings both professional excellence and cultural understanding to her work.

"IN THE LEGAL WORLD, SMALL DETAILS MATTER," SHE SAYS. "BUT HOW YOU MAKE PEOPLE FEEL THROUGHOUT THE PROCESS MATTERS JUST AS MUCH."

Legal decisions don't have to feel intimidating. With the right guidance, they can feel empowering, and Shivani Sharma remains committed to helping clients move forward with confidence, clarity, and trust.



Katie

FormulaK8

THE MOTHER BEHIND CLEAN SKINCARE AND NATURAL PAIN RELIEF



FormulaK8 was born during one of life's most defining seasons, motherhood.

Founder Katie Powell didn't set out to build a skincare and wellness brand. She was simply trying to protect her growing family. While pregnant with her son, Braxton, Katie began questioning the products she used every day, assuming that well-known brands would naturally be safe.

"I started really reading ingredient labels for the first time," Katie shares. "And I was honestly shocked by how many chemicals were hiding in products I had trusted for years."

Natural, cleaner alternatives did exist, but at price points that felt out of reach for many families.

"So I thought, if I can't afford these options, how many other people are in the same position?" she says. "That didn't sit right with me."

So Katie did what many mothers do when solutions fall short: She created her own.

She began formulating products using plant-based, natural ingredients that were safe, effective, and thoughtfully made. What started at her kitchen counter soon evolved into something much larger, a growing realization that wellness shouldn't feel exclusive or out of reach.

"Our mission has always been simple," Katie explains.

"WE'RE HERE TO HELP. EVERYONE
DESERVES SAFE, EFFECTIVE PRODUCTS
WITHOUT HARMFUL CHEMICALS."

That belief became the foundation of FormulaK8, a Canadian-made, Okanagan-born brand built on kindness, transparency, and the desire to help.

At its core, FormulaK8 focuses on creating clean, toxin-free wellness products designed to enhance vitality, soothe pain, and support skin health, without compromise. Each formula eliminates harsh ingredients while maintaining results that people can genuinely feel.

But FormulaK8's story doesn't stop at skincare.

Katie's mission deepened during her mother's battle with chronic pain. Following spinal surgery, her mother was prescribed heavy opioids that dulled not only the pain, but her presence. Watching someone she loved struggle with side effects and dependency, Katie once again turned to natural solutions, this time creating pain-relief salves infused with healing, plant-based ingredients.

"It was hard to watch," Katie recalls. "She wasn't herself. The medication helped the pain, but it took so much from her at the same time."

Over time, those remedies helped reduce her mother's reliance on medication and restore a sense of vitality that had been missing.

That experience solidified FormulaK8's purpose: to offer holistic, effective alternatives that support both physical and emotional well-being.

Sustainability is woven into every part of the brand. FormulaK8 uses ethically sourced, plant-based ingredients and recyclable packaging, intentionally avoiding wastefulness, greenwashing, or surface-level sustainability claims. Each decision is made with long-term impact in mind, caring for both people and the planet.

The brand's commitment to wellness extends beyond its products. FormulaK8 proudly donates 5% of all sales to the Canadian Mental Health Association Kelowna, reinforcing the belief that true wellness includes mental health, community care, and compassion.

Whether it's skincare that revitalizes or natural remedies that ease discomfort, everything FormulaK8 creates is rooted in the same guiding principle: help should be honest, inclusive, and grounded in care.



Today, FormulaK8 stands as more than a business. It's a reflection of Katie's journey as a mother, a daughter, and a woman who chose to question the status quo and build something better.

Because at FormulaK8, wellness isn't about perfection.

It's about care. And everyone deserves access to it.



Taylor Morrice

Our Yoga Space

WELCOME HOME: TAYLOR MORRICE ON COURAGE, COMMUNITY, AND CREATING SPACE TO BECOME

For Taylor Morrice, yoga was never meant to be a performance.

Her first experience at 15, a gym class squeezed between rows of cardio machines, left her unimpressed and disconnected. It wasn't until she stepped into a real studio that something shifted. What she found there wasn't just movement, but presence. Not instruction, but permission. And over time, that quiet, grounding practice would become the foundation for her life's work.

Today, Taylor is the founder of Our Yoga Space in Kelowna, a studio built on the belief that yoga is not about flexibility, appearance, or achievement, but about returning home to yourself.

Before opening her studio, Taylor explored personal training, believing fitness might be her path. But at just 19 years old, she quickly realized it didn't align. She was quiet, introspective, and still learning how to move through hardship herself.

"I didn't feel right yelling at people in a gym to encourage them," she reflects. "I hadn't lived enough life yet to tell someone else how to push through theirs."

Instead of forcing a path that didn't fit, Taylor listened. Yoga remained, not as a career plan, but as a steady companion. After moving

to the Okanagan, she enrolled in her Yoga Teacher Training and continued to practice consistently. For five years, she quietly was holding a vision she didn't want to rush into action. The time had to feel right.

While searching for a space to open a studio, Taylor experienced a pregnancy loss that changed everything. "Life felt too short to keep waiting," she says. "I knew I couldn't put my dreams on the back burner anymore and I needed to pursue them for myself and my future children."

Six months later, she became pregnant with her son. When she signed the lease for Our Yoga Space, Benji was just six months old. When the studio opened, he was ten months old.

What followed was a whirlwind, opening a business, navigating motherhood, and later welcoming a second child during the stress of the pandemic, all while holding space for others.

"It was a wild few years," she says honestly. "My nervous system has finally settled."

Yoga, she credits, is what carried her through.

The space Taylor stepped into had housed yoga studios since 2008 and had sat vacant for a couple years before she stepped through the doors. The alignment was immediate. She transformed it physically, new floors, a brick wall, but more importantly, she transformed it energetically. Today, Our Yoga Space offers daily classes in a quiet, infrared-heated room designed to feel spacious and grounding.

"I always say 'we,'" she explains. "Because this was never meant to be my space. It's ours."

The studio's motto, Welcome Home, speaks to something deeper than atmosphere. It's an invitation inward, a reminder that beneath the noise, expectations, and constant doing, there is a place of steadiness within.

Our Yoga Space is a collective effort. From her management team to her teachers and staff, she credits their dedication and shared values for creating the welcoming, grounded community the studio is known for.

Taylor teaches five to six days a week, not because she has to, but because it's her favourite part of the job. She also practices as a student just as often.

Yoga, for her, is not limited to the mat.

"It's how I choose kindness over avoidance," she explains. "How I have hard conversations. How I sit with discomfort long enough to grow."

She's quick to clear up common misconceptions. "Yoga isn't about handstands or having a body that looks a certain way. "Being an 'advanced yogi'", she continues, "isn't defined by how a posture looks, but by the awareness you bring to it, and to your body while you're there."

"No one is watching you," she reminds newcomers. "Everyone is too busy working through their own experience."

The real practice, she believes, is having the courage to show up, imperfect, unsure, and exactly as you are.

As a deeply hands-on owner, Taylor manages client communications, teaches classes, and prioritizes knowing her students by name. Expansion isn't her focus. Nourishing what already exists is.

But her message reaches far beyond her studio walls.

For women who feel quiet, uncertain, or pulled in a dozen directions, yet carry a dream of their own, Taylor offers this advice:

**"CUT THE NOISE.
SIT WITH YOURSELF.
TRUST WHAT YOU
ALREADY KNOW
IN YOUR GUT."**

And sometimes, all it takes is stepping through a door that says: *Welcome Home*.

With love + heart.



Bella Vita Early Learning

BUILDING BETTER BEGINNINGS

For Bella Vita Early Learning, it's not about managing children or filling time between drop-off and pick-up. It is about respect. About curiosity. And about trusting that children, even in their earliest years, are whole people with something meaningful to offer.

As owner and CEO at Bella Vita Early Learning, Amanda is helping change the way people think about childcare in the Okanagan and beyond. Inspired by the Reggio Emilia approach, Bella Vita is built on the belief that children learn best when they are listened to, respected, and encouraged to explore in their own way, rather than being told exactly what to do or create.

“WE’RE MORE THAN CHILDCARE,” AMANDA EXPLAINS. “WE’RE CULTIVATING A SPACE WHERE CHILDREN CAN APPRECIATE THE BEAUTY IN THEMSELVES, IN OTHERS, AND IN THE WORLD AROUND THEM.”

Amanda didn't take a traditional path into early childhood education. With a background in radio, she never expected to work in the ECE field at all. But becoming a young mother and struggling to afford licensed childcare changed her perspective. Seeing the gap between what families need and what is actually available inspired her to step in, speak up, and help create something better.

Today, the childcare sector faces mounting challenges. A declining birth rate, increased competition for limited funding, and government policies that fund only filled spaces while expenses assume full enrollment have created an unstable landscape for providers. Yet, Amanda believes the biggest challenge is helping families understand why quality early care matters.

A recent UBC study revealed that more than a third of children entering kindergarten are developmentally delayed, a trend amplified by the COVID-19 pandemic. At the same time, fewer families are accessing preschool programs, often opting for lower-cost, full-day care without realizing the long-term impact of early learning environments.

“The most important development, social, emotional, confidence-building, happens before age six,” Amanda says. “If we don't get that right, we're setting children up to struggle later.”

Bella Vita's approach intentionally moves away from traditional, product-driven learning. Instead of crafts with pre-cut shapes and expected results, classrooms are filled with open-ended materials, what Amanda calls “high affordance materials.” Magna-Tiles, natural elements, and loose parts invite children to imagine, experiment, and problem-solve.



“Teaching children how to learn, not what to learn, builds confidence,” she explains. “When there's no ‘right answer,’ children don't feel defeated, they feel empowered.”

That philosophy was reinforced during Amanda's visit to Reggio Emilia schools in Italy, where children consistently demonstrated higher levels of critical thinking and independence. The difference, she observed, was freedom: freedom to think, to fail, and to try again.

Bella Vita's programs are also deeply nature-based, with children spending significant time outdoors. “Nature is grounding,” Amanda says. “It teaches patience, resilience, and connection in ways no classroom ever could.”

Connection is at the heart of everything Bella Vita does. Educators, families, and children are seen as partners in learning, supported by a full-time pedagogist Amy Wesley, who mentors educators in the classrooms weekly, a rare and important investment in the sector and quality of care provided to families. Community exhibits and shared celebrations honour children's work and reinforce that learning is something to be celebrated, not rushed.

Despite rising costs, Bella Vita remains committed to keeping fees as accessible as possible while investing heavily in educator well-being. Mental health supports, ongoing professional development, and respect for the specialized education ECEs bring are non-negotiables.

“ECE is hard work,” Amanda says. “If we don't support educators, we can't expect them to support children.”

With five locations across Lake Country, Glenmore, and Kettle Valley, and with careful expansion underway, Amanda remains focused on advocacy, quality, and long-term change. She co-founded a childcare professionals association to push for higher standards and continues to speak out for children, families and educators alike.

“I WORRY ABOUT CHILDREN BEING FORCED INTO SYSTEMS THAT DON'T FIT THEM,” SHE SAYS. “BUT I ALSO HAVE HOPE. WHEN WE LISTEN TO CHILDREN — REALLY LISTEN — THEY SHOW US A BETTER WAY FORWARD.”

At Bella Vita Early Learning, that belief isn't just philosophy. It's practice, every single day.



Allyson Graf



YMCA of Southern Interior BC

WHEN WOMEN ARE SUPPORTED, COMMUNITIES THRIVE

For Allyson Graf, leadership has never been about standing at the front of the room. It has been about listening closely, creating space for others, and building something meaningful alongside the community she serves.

That philosophy has shaped her entire journey with the YMCA. On March 7, 2022, Allyson stepped into the role of President and CEO of the YMCA of Southern Interior BC, a natural next chapter after more than two decades of growing within the organization. She began her career with the YMCA in the late 1990s in youth employment programming and went on to hold roles across fundraising, childcare, program development, and community initiatives. Rather than following a single path, she built a leadership style rooted in understanding people and the systems that support them.

"I've been fortunate to have many careers within the YMCA," Allyson says. "Each role gave me a deeper understanding of our mission and the responsibility we have to support people at every stage of life."

When Allyson applied for the CEO role, she admits she experienced moments of self-doubt, something many women face when stepping into senior leadership positions.

"I didn't always feel confident," she shares. "What helped was doing the deep work: understanding why I wanted the role, engaging with an executive coach, and learning how to lead as my authentic self."

That authenticity has become one of her greatest strengths. Thoughtful rather than loud, observant rather than reactive, Allyson believes leadership today looks different than it once did. "Leadership is about knowing when to step in," she says, "and when to let others lead."



Allyson's approach to leadership is grounded in trust and care, with a deep belief in shared responsibility. Leading alongside an all-female executive leadership team, she prioritizes people, collaboration, and creating space for others to lead, knowing that lasting impact is built collectively.

Her team includes Danielle Miranda, Chief Operating Officer; Erin Strong, Chief People Officer; Tammie Watson, Vice President of Marketing and Philanthropy; and Robyn Moore, Vice President of Health, Fitness, and Aquatics.

Danielle Miranda brings an operational lens shaped by coaching, mentorship, and deep respect for team development. Known for fostering safe, empowering environments, she leads with clarity and encouragement, helping teams find confidence, purpose, and their personal best.

Erin Strong's approach to people leadership is rooted in balance and humanity. With more than two decades of experience in human resources, she leads with both discipline and joy, grounded in reconciliation, trust, and the belief that strong organizations are built by people who feel supported, seen, and well cared for.

Tammie Watson's strength lies in connection. With a background in philanthropy, communications, and community engagement, she builds relationships that extend far beyond campaigns or initiatives. Her work bridges storytelling and impact, ensuring the YMCA's mission resonates both internally and throughout the communities it serves.

Robyn Moore leads with a focus on wellness, access, and long-term health. Through her work in fitness and aquatics, she helps create spaces where individuals of all ages and abilities can begin or rebuild their relationship with movement, health, and belonging.

"Our executive leadership team is a talented, compassionate, and brilliant group of women," Allyson says. "I'm grateful to work alongside them."

Today, the YMCA of Southern Interior BC employs more than 650 staff and supports thousands of individuals and families across the region. Seventy percent of its workforce is made up of women, many of whom balance careers, caregiving, and community leadership.

At the heart of this work is the YMCA's impact on women, families, and youth. From childcare programs that enable women to participate fully in the workforce, to employment programs for young parents, women entrepreneurs, newcomers, and women fleeing violence, the Y plays a vital role in economic stability and social connection.

The YMCA's ECE Training Program, in particular, has been transformative. By removing financial and learning barriers, it enables equity-seeking groups including women, newcomers, and youth, to receive free education to become licensed early childhood educators. This creates access to meaningful, well-paying work while expanding affordable childcare spaces, allowing more parents, especially mothers, to re-enter the workforce and strengthen their household stability.

The YMCA is also responding to growing community needs. Allyson notes a rise in social isolation, mental health challenges, and financial strain. In response, the Y focuses on prevention, wellness, and belonging.

"WE'RE ABOUT KEEPING PEOPLE IN HEALTH, NOT HEALTHCARE," SHE SAYS. "WHETHER IT'S YOUTH FINDING A SAFE SPACE, OLDER ADULTS BEGINNING THEIR HEALTH JOURNEY, OR FAMILIES SEEKING CONNECTION, THE Y IS OFTEN THAT THIRD SPACE PEOPLE RELY ON."

Jessica Hobden

Blue Lime Property Maintenance

THE ACCIDENTAL CEO: BECOMING THE LEADER SHE NEVER PLANNED TO BE

Jessica Hobden never set out to become a CEO. Her original path was rooted in biology, conservation, and time spent outdoors. For years, she worked for a nonprofit in the bush, driven by a deep love of nature and the environment. Business ownership, especially in property maintenance, was never part of the plan.

Blue Lime Property Maintenance came to life out of necessity. With two young children and limited local job opportunities that could support their family, Jess and her husband Doug created a business simply to create stability. Jess handled the books and administration at first, fully intending to return to biology. But as the company grew, so did her role.

Over time, Jess realized she was not just supporting the business; she was capable of leading it. What began as a practical solution became something deeply fulfilling. Leadership, strategy, and vision quickly became the parts of the business that filled her cup the most.

Even the company's name carries personal meaning. Blue and lime were Jess and Doug's wedding colours, inspired by the natural places they love and connect with. The business grew from their life together, not from a brand strategy. Blue represents flow and movement, much like Doug, while lime reflects Jess's grounding energy and connection to nature. That sense of partnership remains at the core of how they run their business today.

Operating in a male-dominated industry, Jess brings a people-first approach to leadership. She emphasizes communication, accountability, and care, encouraging her team to think beyond the work itself. For Jess, the business has never been just about property maintenance. It is about the humans behind it.



Lori with With Love photography

Balancing business ownership, marriage, and motherhood is far from perfect. There is no clean separation between work and life, only integration. The systems that support their company now support their home as well, starting to create structure where chaos once lived and allowing space for growth in every direction.

This path has not been easy. There have been moments of doubt, uncertainty, and wondering if it would be easier to walk away. What Jess has learned is that there is no roadmap and no moment where everything suddenly makes sense. Confidence did not arrive fully formed. What grew instead was trust in her instincts, her values, and the people around her. The greatest reward has not been the company itself, but building something alongside Doug and showing their children that life does not have to follow a single, expected path. Together, they have created more flexibility, more presence, and more meaningful ways to show up for their family, their team, and their community.

It was never planned. It is still unfolding, shaped by curiosity, courage, and a willingness to do things differently.

Paulina Huerta

Sweet Cloud Ice Cream Rolls

FROM DREAM TO SWEET CLOUD

Paulina Huerta never set out to build something ordinary. Originally from Mexico, she grew up in a small town where family, tradition, and flavour were at the heart of everyday life. At 18, she made the bold move to a big city, where she was immersed in fast-paced energy, rich culture, and endless creative inspiration. When life carried her across the world—first to Australia, where she met her husband, and eventually to Kelowna nine years ago, she brought those roots with her, even when the future felt uncertain.

Sweet Cloud Ice Cream Rolls began quietly. A small cart at local farmers' markets was the starting point, chosen intentionally while Paulina tested whether the idea could truly work. What followed was steady growth, loyal customers, and a belief that kept strengthening with each season. The cart became a trailer, the lineups grew longer, and the dream of a permanent storefront never faded.

This spring, that dream becomes a reality. Sweet Cloud Ice Cream Rolls will open its first retail location in the Water by the Park building, marking a major milestone for a business that has traditionally operated seasonally from May through September. For Paulina, it is both exciting and daunting.

The inspiration behind Sweet Cloud traces back to a trip to Thailand, where she watched ice cream made fresh on frozen plates using simple ingredients and local fruit. Although her original vision was to open a taco business, her husband encouraged her to consider ice cream instead, a suggestion that felt perfectly suited to the Okanagan's fruit-forward culture.

Creativity continues to shape every part of the brand. Flavours are influenced by customer feedback, her young and imaginative team, her husband's ideas, and her Mexican heritage. Some experiments resonate immediately while others take time. A Mexican-inspired corn ice cream is one flavour Paulina hopes to reintroduce with the opening of the storefront.

Behind the scenes, opening a physical location has been challenging. Paulina describes the process as stressful, emotional, and far from glamorous. There are moments of doubt alongside moments of pride, often within the same day.

What keeps her grounded is her family. As a mother, Paulina says her children are her greatest motivation and her strongest support system. Balancing business ownership with motherhood is not easy, but she believes women possess a powerful ability to give fully while still creating something meaningful for themselves.

Find what is yours in this moment of life and claim it. Women are builders, nurturers, and leaders, deeply committed and endlessly capable of reinvention. When we support one another, we don't just grow businesses; we build communities where women rise, evolve, and thrive together.

Sweet Cloud Ice Cream Rolls is more than a business. It is a reflection of resilience, culture, and the quiet strength it takes to turn a dream into something real.



Sarah Enns

The Field Room

LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE ROOTED IN PLACE AND PEOPLE

For Sarah Enns, the dream of shaping outdoor spaces began long before she ever knew the term landscape architecture. It started in her childhood backyard, watching her mother sketch garden ideas on graph paper and reimagine their family garden year after year. Plants were not simply decorative; they were part of daily life, creativity, and care.

That early influence quietly shaped the path that would later become The Field Room, an Okanagan-based landscape architecture studio Sarah founded in 2018. Today, her work blends ecology, beauty, and human experience, creating outdoor spaces that feel intentional, grounded, and deeply connected to place.

Landscape architecture extends beyond traditional landscaping, operating at the intersection of design, environment, and community. She collaborates with architects and engineers from the earliest stages of a project, carefully considering how people move through a space, how sunlight and shade affect comfort, and how landscapes will evolve over time. Her designs are created not just for the moment they are installed, but for years into the future.

Every element is chosen with purpose. From plant selection to water use, Sarah designs landscapes that respond to the Okanagan climate while respecting the surrounding natural environment. Her goal is to create spaces that feel natural and lasting, rather than forced or overly maintained.

For Sarah, the most meaningful part of her work goes beyond plans and drawings. It is the stories people bring with them. Gardens, she believes, are filled with memory and emotion. A lilac can honour a grandmother. Cherry blossoms can recall a city once loved. Through her work, she weaves nostalgia, joy, and personal meaning into the land itself.



That philosophy also led to the creation of The Field Crew, The Field Room's maintenance division. Designed to support homeowners directly, it focuses on helping people work with nature rather than against it, creating healthier landscapes that require less effort over time.

As a woman working in a traditionally male-led, construction-adjacent industry, and as a self-employed entrepreneur for nearly a decade, Sarah credits community and mentorship as essential to her success. She believes there is room for everyone to thrive, especially when women support one another.

Through The Field Room, Sarah is not just designing landscapes. She is creating spaces where people can reconnect with nature, memory, and themselves.



Allie Chmilar

NowMedia Group

BECOMING COMFORTABLE IN HER OWN VOICE

Born and raised in Kamloops, Allie pursued a Bachelor of Business with a major in marketing and a minor in human resources. She was naturally drawn to people-focused work, inspired by the idea that behind every business is a story, a personality, and a problem waiting to be solved. Marketing and HR felt like the backbone of any organization, where communication, trust, and growth intersect.

With two older brothers and a childhood rooted in masculine energy, Allie didn't fully realize until later how much her upbringing shaped the way she showed up in the world. At the time, it was simply life.

What it gave her, though, was resilience, independence, and an ease in navigating conversations with anyone, traits that would become the foundation of her career.

Before stepping fully into marketing and media sales, Allie ran her own student painting business. The experience taught her more than any classroom could. She managed crews, sold services door-to-door, faced rejection daily, and learned quickly that confidence isn't something you're born with, it's built through repetition and discomfort.

Along the way, she noticed something else: many of her strongest team members were women.

"They were organized, detail-oriented, hardworking, and incredibly reliable," Allie recalls. "In so many situations, women exceeded expectations simply because they cared deeply about doing things well."

Despite thriving in sales-driven environments, Allie's relationships with other women didn't always feel intuitive early on. Growing up with brothers meant she sometimes felt more at ease communicating with men. Over time, she learned that being a "girls' girl" doesn't require sameness, it requires respect, support, and space for growth.

As her career evolved, so did her confidence. Sales and marketing offered something Allie values deeply: flexibility. No two days look the same. One moment she's learning about a new industry; the next she's helping a local business share its story or launch a campaign. The work rewards curiosity, persistence, and effort.

That flexibility also gave her room to try, pivot, and occasionally fail and she's grateful for it.

"I think trying different things is how you learn what you actually like," she says. "Not everything works, but everything teaches you something."

If there's one thing Allie wishes she had known earlier, it's the importance of financial literacy.

"I wish saving money had been taught better," she admits. "Not just earning, but understanding how to manage it and feel confident with it."

Today, Allie is proud to be part of projects that uplift women and highlight real stories, including her work on *I AM WOMAN*. For her, success isn't about having it all figured out, it's about staying curious, working hard, and trusting that finding your voice is a process shaped by experience and courage.

"I still don't know exactly what I want to be when I grow up," she says with a smile. "And I think that's okay."



The Spark Behind Every Shift.

Be part of I AM WOMAN 2027 and share your story with the community.



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