

Shattered Ceilings

by SHERALYN ROMAN

Someone reached out to me recently to share thoughts on the election of Kamala Harris as Vice-President of the United States. They, along with millions of women around the world, are heralding her victory as a significant step forward in nudging the needle ever closer towards achieving equity, if not parity, with our male counterparts. That the new VP also identifies as African American and of South Asian descent adds to the significance of the occasion as little girls from around the world can now see their own reflection staring back at them.

Kamala Harris has a long history of shattering ceilings, as do many Canadian women and women all around the world, whether in business, politics, the justice system or leading non-profit agencies. Her election presents an important opportunity to share our own stories of empowerment right here close to home. Caledon (and the surrounding area) has its own proud history of women in politics and in positions of power, local women who are role models to us all.

Caledon's first female Mayor, Carol Seglins, was elected in 1994 and remained in office until 2003. Prior to her time as Mayor, she had also served as a Regional Councillor. As a trailblazer for Caledon, Ms. Seglin's Mayoral term was immediately followed by the strong leadership of Mayor Marolyn Morrison, a female role model who served the community of Caledon well for over 13 years, in office from 2003 through 2014.

Mayor Morrison was (and is) known for a number of character traits, including her refusal to be intimidated by just about anyone. She originally began her career as a Public School Trustee and then Regional Councillor before becoming our Mayor. 'Few decisions please everybody,' she was once quoted as saying but making hard decisions never deterred her from making them and she retired undefeated.

Our current sitting Council is comprised of nine members the majority of which (five) I'm happy to say are women. The current CAO of Caledon, named in March of 2020, just as the pandemic took hold, is Carey Herd, an accomplished municipal leader who has been with the Town since 2013. Further evidence that Caledon might be considered leading the way in terms of leadership opportunities for women is that of the 11 departments at the recently reorganized Town offices, six are led by women and the CEO of the Caledon Public Library is also female. For a Town of about 70,000 people, I think we are doing an admirable job.

But despite these marvellous examples of local women in leadership positions, we still need to ask ourselves some hard questions. Questions like whether women intentionally hold one another down? Do we support and empower other women or do we seek to undermine them? Is there a sense of female solidarity or do successful women operate in silos because they see it is the only way forward?

We already know that women are judged differently from men, particularly those seeking or holding political office. We have only to look at the numerous news stories of women like Hillary Clinton who was told at one point in her campaign for the presidency to start acting more feminine because she was too intimidating. Females everywhere will share stories of being seen as 'moody,' 'domineering' or 'b*tch' instead of strong-willed, able to make decisions or principled descriptors more apt to be ascribed to males in leadership positions.

Examples abound of women supporting women and I've been lucky to be a part of many great networking groups with a specific focus on helping women in business. But for every woman raised up, who might we be leaving behind?

Entire books have been written by women seeking to support their fellow females in business. 'Lean In' by Sheryl Sandberg comes to mind. The book originated from a TED Talk she gave in 2010. At that time, she hinted broadly that to achieve equality at work, women need equality at home. That a women's partner must take on an equal share of the unpaid labour in order to achieve success.

According to Rachel Thomas, writing in Fortune magazine, 'The book explained why so few women are at the top of organizations'not because of their shortcomings, but because it's often impossibly hard for them to get there. It dove into the research on bias and shared behind-the-scenes stories about how women deal with workplace indignities that men never face.' Anecdotaly, we all know that men are rarely asked, 'how they will balance work and home life?', yet that question is routine for women, expected even. Sheryl's book wasn't so much a 'how to' manual to achieving equality at the table but rather, a suggestion that 'now that you know this (the difficulty of the journey) you are better prepared to deal with it. Claim your seat the table ' and if you achieve power, use it to help pull down the barriers that hold others back.' While I'd like to think that we do, and we are, pulling down barriers and encouraging one another to claim that seat at the table, I'd prefer to live in a world where it wasn't so hard to find the table in the first place. Former Orangeville mayor Mary Rose shared that during her time in office her colleagues 'were wonderful supporters' and 'accommodating' and while that's good news, I wonder if this is everyone's experience? Of course, none of this even begins to address the additional bias faced by Black women, Indigenous Women and People of Colour.

Still, the election WAS and IS good news. I was gratified to see post after post and tweet after tweet celebrating the Kamala/Biden victory, many containing pictures of little girls from all communities, staring at their TV screens while Vice President Harris was sworn in. These were little girls perhaps now better able to envision a future where they too could hold the office of VP of the United States and perhaps even that of the man standing next to Kamala on the platform that day.

To all of our hard-working Caledon community female change makers ' thank you for your efforts, your hard work and your leadership by example. May you continue to shine a light locally for all young women who dream of brighter tomorrows where equity and parity are so commonplace, we no longer devote whole articles to their importance.

Thanks LK for your thoughts - I hope I've done the topic justice.