



Women Entrepreneur's Initiative

In Partnership with



Empowering Women Entrepreneurs:

A Reflection on the Women Entrepreneur's Initiative

Over the past two months, the Northwestern Innovation Centre, in partnership with the National Angel Capital Organization (NACO), embarked on a journey that has left a permanent mark on our understanding of women entrepreneurship in our region. Through hosting roundtable discussions and conducting interviews, we delved into the remarkable stories of women entrepreneurs, unveiling a tapestry of resilience, determination, and unwavering spirit.

One of the most striking revelations was the sheer number of women who own businesses in our region. Their stories echoed tales of starting with just a small loan, facing numerous hurdles in securing further financial support, yet forging ahead with unwavering resolve to turn their dreams into reality. Despite facing challenges, it was evident that the impediment wasn't typically men in their workplaces but rather the lack of a robust support system at home. Additionally, the prevalence of male-dominated decision makers and pitching panels often led to a disconnect when products catered to women, resulting in swift rejection due to a lack of understanding or appreciation for the innovation presented by female entrepreneurs.

Furthermore, it became glaringly apparent that women entrepreneurs often bear the disproportionate burden of household responsibilities. Additionally, the scarcity of women in decision-making positions for loan approvals exacerbates the challenges faced by aspiring female entrepreneurs. Compounding this issue is the glaring gap in funding accessibility, particularly concerning government grants and loans which often overlook service and retail businesses, segments predominantly owned by women.

However, amidst these challenges, there emerged a sense of camaraderie and solidarity among the women who participated in our discussions. Their openness and honesty were not only inspiring but also served as a catalyst for collective action. As a woman myself, I felt a profound sense of pride and honor in bearing witness to their journeys.

Yet, our reflections are not merely confined to admiration; they serve as a clarion call for action. It's imperative that we, as a community, redouble our efforts in supporting women entrepreneurs, particularly those in the North who grapple with logistical hurdles and exorbitant operational costs. Our heartfelt gratitude extends to NACO for their invaluable partnership, and we earnestly hope that our collective endeavors will yield tangible results in opening up capital avenues for women entrepreneurs.

In closing, this journey has not only deepened our understanding but has ignited a fervent commitment to championing the cause of women entrepreneurship. Let us forge ahead with unwavering determination, knowing that by empowering women, we uplift entire communities and pave the way for a more equitable and prosperous future.

Carole Long

Business Advisor, Intellectual Property
Northwestern Ontario Innovation Centre

Amber Kivisto - BioNorth Solutions

Amber Kivisto is a force of nature, her vibrant personality lighting up any room she enters. She's the President and co-founder of BioNorth Solutions, a company specializing in soil health and rehabilitation. But her journey to success wasn't a straight path; it was a winding road filled with unexpected twists and turns.

BioNorth Solutions wasn't originally Amber's brainchild. It started as a subsidiary of her ex-husband's heavy equipment company. However, when life threw them a curveball and they parted ways, Amber seized the opportunity to take full control of BioNorth. It was a bold move, but one she made with unwavering determination.

Funding her venture was no easy feat. With every penny of her savings poured into the business, she took a leap of faith. Despite the risks, she was committed to seeing her vision come to life. And it paid off. Amber's perseverance, coupled with her ability to navigate the male-dominated industry, propelled BioNorth forward.

Thunder Bay, where BioNorth is based, presented its own set of challenges and opportunities.



The labor shortage and exorbitant shipping costs tested her resolve, but being there also meant access to funding streams that might not have been available elsewhere. Amber embraced the hurdles, turning them into stepping stones on her path to success.

Accessing capital was another battle. The red tape seemed never-ending, and the hoops she had to jump through were exhausting. But Amber refused to back down. She advocated for simpler, faster processes, knowing that women like her deserved equal opportunities in the business world.

Empowerment became a driving force for Amber. She believed in standing tall, speaking up, and owning her worth. Through training programs and breaking down societal barriers, she paved the way for other women to follow in her footsteps.

Despite the challenges, Amber's resilience shone through. BioNorth Solutions thrived under her leadership, raising over a million dollars and making a significant impact in the industry. Her journey was a testament to the power of determination, grit, and unwavering belief in oneself.

As the story of Amber Kivisto unfolds, it becomes clear that she's not just an entrepreneur; she's a trailblazer. Her journey is a reminder that success is possible, even in the face of adversity. And as she continues to forge ahead, one thing's for certain: the best is yet to come for BioNorth Solutions and the remarkable woman behind it.

Claire Reid - Tonnerre

Claire Reid's journey from a young exchange student to a thriving entrepreneur in Thunder Bay is one of resilience, adaptability, and determination. Her story is a testament to the power of pursuing one's dreams despite unexpected challenges and setbacks.

Originally from France, Claire's initial plan was to spend a short time in Thunder Bay as an exchange student. However, she quickly fell in love with the area and decided to extend her stay. What was meant to be a temporary detour soon turned into a decade-long adventure as she built her life in Canada.

While juggling the responsibilities of marriage, motherhood, and her aspirations for further education, Claire encountered unexpected hurdles, including health issues and the onset of the pandemic. Despite these obstacles, she persevered, completing her master's degree while simultaneously caring for her family and exploring avenues for income generation.

Recognizing a niche in the market for translation services, Claire began freelancing, gradually laying the foundation for what would become Tonnerre Writing and Translation Services. In 2022, she officially launched her business, initially focusing on translation but eventually expanding into business support and organizational assistance for nonprofits. However, Claire's journey wasn't without its challenges. As a woman entrepreneur in a smaller city like Thunder Bay, she faced barriers in accessing capital and competing with larger agencies based in urban centers. Moreover, societal expectations regarding the balance between work and family added an additional layer of complexity to her entrepreneurial endeavors.

Society's expectations weighed heavily on her as she juggled the demands of entrepreneurship with the needs of her family. Despite these pressures, Claire



remained committed to prioritizing her family, finding strength in the support of her loved ones.

Claire advocated for greater support and resources for women entrepreneurs. She highlighted the importance of programs tailored specifically to their needs, providing funding for essential projects and fostering a sense of community through networking events and online platforms.

The road to success was paved with moments of self-discovery and growth. Claire learned to embrace her vulnerabilities, acknowledge her limitations, and seek help when needed. Along the way, she shattered misconceptions about the cutthroat nature of the business world, finding instead a network of like-minded individuals willing to lend a helping hand.

As Claire reflects on her experience, she realizes that entrepreneurship is as much a journey of self-discovery as it is about building a successful business. With each obstacle overcome and lesson learned, she grows stronger and more determined to carve out her place in the world of business, proving that with resilience and perseverance, anything is possible.



Kate Strange - Waxed Candle Co.

Kate Strange's journey from a small kitchen experiment to the bustling storefront of Waxed Candle Co. is a testament to resilience, community support, and the drive of a determined entrepreneur.

Kate's venture began humbly, with just \$200 borrowed from her father-in-law to purchase supplies. As an international student in Thunder Bay, Canada, she navigated the challenges of funding her business without access to traditional financial resources. But Kate's determination fueled her journey, and she poured every penny she earned back into her budding candle business, transforming it from a hobby into a thriving enterprise.

The warmth and charm of Thunder Bay played a crucial role in Kate's entrepreneurial odyssey. Initially surprised by the tight-knit and supportive community, she soon realized that the small-town ethos of supporting local businesses was the lifeblood of her success. Customers became friends, eagerly participating in Kate's journey and contributing to the growth of Waxed Candle Co. Their unwavering support, coupled with Kate's relentless work ethic, propelled her business forward even on the toughest days. Yet, Kate's journey wasn't without its challenges. Thunder Bay's

isolation presented logistical hurdles, making it difficult to source supplies and expand her product offerings. However, Kate's resourcefulness led her to innovative solutions, such as partnering with Border Giant to access a wider range of materials from across the border.

As a woman entrepreneur, Kate faced additional barriers, including the struggle to be taken seriously in a male-dominated industry. Despite these obstacles, Kate persevered, determined to defy stereotypes and carve out her place in the business world. She found inspiration in other female-led ventures, realizing that their success paved the way for her own aspirations.

Reflecting on her experiences, Kate highlighted the need for greater awareness and accessibility to funding resources for women entrepreneurs. She emphasized the importance of demystifying the process and providing support to navigate the complexities of financing a business.

Throughout her journey, Kate's most surprising revelation was the resilience of her business, especially during the tumultuous times of the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite the uncertainty and challenges, Waxed Candle Co. not only survived but thrived, a testament to Kate's unwavering dedication and the resilience of her community.

Today, Waxed Candle Co. stands as a beacon of success, a testament to Kate's entrepreneurial spirit and the power of community support. With each flicker of candlelight, Kate's journey illuminates the path for aspiring entrepreneurs, showing that with determination, passion, and a supportive community, anything is possible.





Sarah Johnston - Lovely Body

Sarah Johnston's entrepreneurial journey with Lovely Body Products is a story of perseverance, community support, and the resilience of a woman determined to succeed against the odds.

Sarah's venture began modestly, crafting body products from her home in Thunder Bay back in 2012. With a passion for creating high-quality skincare solutions, Sarah gradually built her brand's reputation, eventually opening her first storefront in 2016. The journey wasn't without its challenges; Sarah initially struggled to secure funding, facing closed doors and a lack of support from traditional avenues. However, this setback only fueled her determination to succeed on her terms, leading her to self-fund her business and avoid taking on unnecessary debt.

Despite the isolation and logistical challenges of operating in Thunder Bay, Sarah found solace in the unwavering support of her community. Thunder Bay's tight-knit network of entrepreneurs and customers rallied behind Lovely Body Products, turning out in droves to support local businesses. Sarah recalls her first grand opening, where a lineup stretched down the street, a testament to the community's enthusiasm for her products.

Yet, running a business in Thunder Bay also posed its challenges. The cost of shipping and the region's isolation added layers of complexity, making it difficult to compete with businesses in more densely populated areas. Despite these obstacles, Sarah remained undeterred, leveraging her resourcefulness and creativity to overcome logistical hurdles.

As a woman entrepreneur, Sarah faced additional barriers, including biases and stereotypes about the seriousness of her business ideas. She experienced firsthand the challenges of being taken seriously in a male-dominated industry, often feeling the need to bring a male presence, such as her stepfather, to



meetings to gain credibility. However, Sarah found inspiration in the success of other women entrepreneurs like her friend Brittany, the owner of Thuja Floral Design, whose achievements served as a beacon of possibility.

Reflecting on her journey, Sarah emphasized the importance of community support and collaboration in empowering women entrepreneurs. She advocated for greater transparency and knowledge sharing among business owners, believing that openness and camaraderie breed success in the entrepreneurial world.

Amidst the challenges, the COVID-19 pandemic unexpectedly became a turning point for Lovely Body Products. As people turned to self-care and gifting during lockdowns, Sarah's business thrived, with customers supporting one another through thoughtful purchases and messages. The pandemic underscored the resilience of Sarah's business model and the enduring power of human connection even in the face of adversity.

Today, Lovely Body Products stands as a testament to Sarah's indomitable spirit and the supportive community of Thunder Bay. Through her journey, Sarah inspires other women entrepreneurs to pursue their dreams.

Retail Paint Store

In the heart of a small city, nestled among the cozy streets and familiar faces, lies a hidden gem—a retail paint store that exudes warmth and creativity. The woman behind this beloved establishment prefers to remain anonymous, her humility a testament to her quiet but profound impact on the community.

With a diverse background spanning sales, marketing, retail management, and social services, she embarked on her entrepreneurial journey 25 years ago. Armed with determination and a thirst for learning, she dove headfirst into the world of business, navigating its twists and turns with grace and resilience.

For this woman, the advantages of running a business in a tight-knit community like Thunder Bay are abundant. Here, relationships are not just transactions; they're bonds forged over years of shared experiences. With each customer who walks through her door, she sees an opportunity to connect on a deeper level, understanding their needs and aspirations to better serve them.

But it's not all smooth sailing in the world of small

business. The challenges loom large, from the limitations of a smaller market to the hefty costs of traveling to trade shows and events. Yet, amidst these hurdles, she perseveres, finding solace in the personalized work environment and the sense of community that surrounds her.

As a woman in business, she knows all too well the barriers that stand in the way of accessing capital. Equity remains a formidable obstacle, a reminder of the uphill battle that many female entrepreneurs face. And while she may be unsure of the solution, her resilience shines through, a beacon of hope for others in similar circumstances.

Reflecting on her journey, she marvels at the cyclical and unpredictable nature of the market. Each ebb and flow brings new challenges and opportunities, testing her resolve and pushing her to adapt and evolve.

In the quiet corners of her paint store, amidst the vibrant hues and creative energy, lies the story of a woman who defied expectations and carved her own path to success. Though her name may remain unknown, her impact on the community is undeniable—a testament to the power of determination, perseverance, and a touch of humility. And as she continues her journey, one thing remains certain: the best is yet to come for this remarkable woman and her beloved business.





Katie Simoneau - Manroc Developments

Katie Simoneau's path to entrepreneurship is a testament to the resilience and innovation fostered in small-town communities. As the Vice President and co-owner of Manroc Developments, an underground mining contracting company based in Manitouwadge, Katie has led her company to global recognition while staying deeply rooted in her hometown.

Manroc Developments, a company with a rich 35-year history, specializes in the Alimak mining method, renowned for its effectiveness in narrow vein deposits. Under Katie's leadership alongside her business partner, Chris Ball, the company has expanded its reach far beyond the borders of Manitouwadge, serving clients across the globe. From Africa to Uruguay, Honduras to Kazakhstan, Manroc's expertise is sought after in diverse mining environments, showcasing the Northern Ontario-based company's prowess on the international stage.

With a workforce of approximately 250 employees, Manroc Developments is not just a business; it's a cornerstone of the Manitouwadge community. Katie's commitment to her hometown runs deep, evident in the company's investment in local talent and infrastructure. The presence of two offices and three shops in Manitouwadge, coupled with an office in Thunder Bay, speaks volumes about Manroc's dedication to its roots while maintaining a global outlook.

Despite the challenges inherent in scaling a business from a small town, Katie's entrepreneurial spirit knows no bounds. She navigates the constraints of limited resources with ingenuity, turning obstacles into opportunities for growth. Through strategic partnerships and a focus on nurturing local talent, Katie ensures that Manroc remains at the forefront of the mining industry, both domestically and internationally.

One of the pillars supporting Manroc's success is its longstanding relationships with financial institutions and suppliers—a testament to the trust and mutual respect cultivated over decades. In a small town like Manitouwadge, personal connections matter just as much as professional acumen. Katie's close ties with the local banking community have facilitated access to capital and resources essential for the company's expansion and innovation. While larger cities may offer more options, Katie values the personalized attention and trust that come with doing business in a close-knit community.

As a woman entrepreneur, Katie acknowledges the fortunate position she's in regarding access to capital. However, she remains acutely aware of the systemic barriers that many women face in the business world. Her advocacy for more support programs and a shift in mindset reflects her commitment to leveling the playing field for aspiring women entrepreneurs.

Looking back on her journey, Katie is filled with gratitude for the opportunities and challenges that have shaped her path. From humble beginnings in Manitouwadge to leading a globally renowned company, her story embodies the spirit of perseverance, innovation, and community that defines the best of entrepreneurship. With each milestone, Katie's legacy grows, inspiring others to dream big and make their mark on the world, no matter where they come from.

Jenna Curtis - Wildwoode Variety

Jenna Curtis, a tenacious entrepreneur with a knack for business, embarked on a journey fraught with challenges and triumphs. Armed with a diverse skill set and an indomitable spirit, Jenna navigated the complexities of starting and funding multiple ventures in the rugged terrain of entrepreneurship.

As the proprietor of a small convenience store nestled along Highway 102 in Kaministiquia, Jenna faced a myriad of obstacles from the outset. Yet, her determination to succeed propelled her forward, driving her to explore unconventional avenues for funding. Despite encountering resistance from traditional banking institutions, Jenna found solace in the support of the Business Development Bank of Canada (BDC), a lifeline for female entrepreneurs like herself.

The journey was not without its highs and lows. Jenna weathered the storm of the COVID-19 pandemic, experiencing a surge in business followed by the sobering reality of post-pandemic financial constraints. As the euphoria of success waned, Jenna found herself grappling with the harsh realities of repayment and financial stability.



In the midst of adversity, Jenna found respite in the unwavering support of her local community. Thunder Bay and its surrounding areas proved to be fertile ground for entrepreneurship, offering a tight-knit network of support and camaraderie. However, the challenges of sourcing supplies and navigating delivery logistics posed significant hurdles, requiring Jenna to employ creativity and resourcefulness to keep her businesses afloat.

Yet, amidst the triumphs and tribulations, Jenna remained steadfast in her commitment to empowering women in business. She spoke candidly about the barriers faced by female entrepreneurs, from the struggle to be taken seriously by financial institutions to the pervasive gender biases that permeate the industry.

In advocating for change, Jenna called upon government organizations and banks to level the playing field, urging them to remove restrictive barriers and offer more accessible funding options for women-owned businesses.

As Jenna's entrepreneurial journey was characterized by her resilience and determination. While the road ahead may be fraught with challenges, Jenna's unwavering spirit and boundless optimism serve as a beacon of hope for aspiring entrepreneurs everywhere. With her eyes set on the horizon, Jenna Curtis continues to pave the way for a new generation of trailblazing women in business, proving that with grit and determination, anything is possible.

Laura Paxton - Flashback Photo

Laura Paxton, the creative force behind Flashback Photo, embarked on her entrepreneurial journey over a decade ago with a passion for capturing life's most precious moments. Armed with her camera and an artistic vision, she set out to build her business from the ground up.

After honing her photography skills in College, Laura didn't dive headfirst into entrepreneurship. Instead, she meticulously laid the groundwork, relying on word of mouth to gradually establish her presence in Thunder Bay's tight-knit community. It wasn't until nine years later that Flashback Photo became her full-time source of income.

But it was during the pandemic that Laura faced a pivotal moment. Accessing a grant through Paro Centre for Women's Enterprise, she was able to breathe new life into her business. With this financial boost, she embarked on a rebranding journey, investing in marketing and advertising to expand her reach. This leap of faith paid off, propelling her past the hurdles that once seemed insurmountable.

In Thunder Bay, Laura found both advantages and challenges as a small business owner. The community's collective mentality supported her endeavors, yet the city's size presented its own set of obstacles. While visibility and support for local businesses were abundant, the market could be oversaturated, and customers hesitant to spend.

Navigating the world of business funding posed another set of challenges, particularly for women entrepreneurs like Laura. Despite her creative prowess, she struggled with the business side of things and yearned for more guidance and support. Government organizations and banks could do more to streamline the process, offering accessible information and assistance tailored to the needs of female entrepreneurs.

Amidst her entrepreneurial pursuits, Laura faced the



added challenge of balancing business ambitions with family responsibilities, a struggle shared by many women entrepreneurs. Juggling the demands of running a business with those of childcare and household tasks often left her feeling stretched thin. This reality underscored the importance of accessible support systems and flexible resources for women navigating both professional and personal spheres.

Throughout her journey, Laura's most surprising revelation was the power of taking that initial leap. Accessing funding not only provided her with the means to grow her business but also served as a catalyst for personal and professional development. It was a reminder that sometimes, all it takes is a little push to overcome obstacles and reach new heights.

As Laura continues to capture memories through her lens, her story serves as inspiration for aspiring entrepreneurs everywhere. With creativity, determination, and a willingness to seek support, anything is possible in the world of small business.

Gwen Marsonet and Beverly Barlow - Borderlands

Gwen Marsonet and Beverly Barlow, the dynamic duo behind the sheep farm and wool mill, epitomize the spirit of innovation and resilience in Thunder Bay's entrepreneurial landscape. Their journey from humble beginnings to thriving agricultural business is a testament to their unwavering determination and the supportive community that surrounds them. With a passion for local sustainability and a vision to create something truly unique, Gwen and Beverly pooled their resources and savings to kickstart their venture. The addition of grants specifically tailored to agricultural equipment and their wool mill provided the crucial boost needed to turn their dream into reality.

In Thunder Bay, where the community's emphasis on all things local is palpable, Gwen and Beverly found themselves in an environment ripe with opportunity. Despite the challenges posed by the region's relative isolation, they saw it as an advantage, offering lower competition and heightened visibility in a market hungry for homegrown initiatives.

Yet, like any entrepreneurial journey, theirs was not



without its obstacles. The need for labor to scale their operations posed a significant challenge. In an ideal world, Gwen envisioned a funding mechanism that would offer a safety net, replacing off-farm income for a year to allow businesses like theirs to flourish without financial strain.

As women entrepreneurs, Gwen and Beverly were keenly aware of the barriers preventing access to capital. High thresholds and stringent qualifications made securing sufficient funding a daunting task. With their debt already at its limit, the prospect of scaling seemed daunting without additional financial support.

Despite the hurdles, Gwen and Beverly remained undeterred, advocating for solutions to empower women entrepreneurs. Their call for unsecured interest-free loans echoed the need for innovative approaches to funding, ensuring that aspiring business owners could pursue their dreams without being shackled by debt.

Throughout their funding journey, Gwen and Beverly were surprised by the complexity and meticulous detail required. The process was arduous and time-consuming, yet they persevered, fueled by their passion for their business and the unwavering support of their community.

As Gwen and Beverly continue to navigate the intricacies of entrepreneurship, their story serves as a beacon of inspiration for aspiring business owners in Thunder Bay and beyond. With resilience, resourcefulness, and a commitment to their vision, they prove that with determination, anything is possible, even amidst the challenges of accessing capital.

Angie Vanderwees - A. Vanderwees Counselling and Psychotherapy

Angie Vanderwees, a resilient entrepreneur with roots in Thunder Bay, embarked on a journey that intertwined personal growth with professional success. Despite her initial ventures outside her hometown, Angie's experiences laid the foundation for her current business, A. Vanderwees Counseling and Psychotherapy, a thriving psychotherapy practice serving clients throughout Ontario.

Raised in Thunder Bay amidst the backdrop of her father's garden center, Angie's entrepreneurial spirit was nurtured from an early age. Her foray into business began with a gift shop venture in Nova Scotia, an endeavor that showcased her adaptability and determination. Yet, it was her journey of self-discovery and education that ultimately led her back to her roots and shaped her path as a registered psychotherapist.

With a keen understanding of the challenges facing mental health practitioners, Angie navigated the complexities of starting her practice with pragmatism and resourcefulness. While formal funding eluded her, she leveraged her savings to invest in essential elements like website development and logo design, crafting a professional identity that reflected her values and vision.

Although Angie ultimately decided to base her practice out of Kingston, Ontario, she recognized both the opportunities and obstacles of operating in Thunder Bay and surrounding areas. Despite the potential demand for mental health services, she acknowledged the financial constraints faced by potential clients, highlighting the delicate balance between affordability and sustainability in her field.

Through her candid reflections, Angie shed light on the barriers women entrepreneurs face in accessing capital and resources. While she found ways to navigate these challenges independently, she emphasized the importance of tailored funding



opportunities and support systems tailored to the unique needs of women-led businesses.

Despite the hurdles, Angie remained resilient, embracing the evolution of her practice and embracing new opportunities for growth. Her dedication to her craft and commitment to her clients underscored her passion for mental health advocacy and her unwavering belief in the transformative power of therapy.

As Angie's journey continues, her story serves as an inspiration to aspiring entrepreneurs, demonstrating that with perseverance and a steadfast vision, even the most daunting obstacles can be overcome. With A. Vanderwees Counseling and Psychotherapy, Angie not only provides essential mental health services but also embodies the spirit of resilience and empowerment that defines her entrepreneurial journey.



Robbyn Fraser - Balloon Stylings

Robbyn Fraser's journey from bored stay-at-home mom during the pandemic to the owner of Balloon Stylings was nothing short of a testament to resilience, creativity, and the power of community support.

When COVID-19 brought life to a standstill, Robbyn found herself searching for ways to fill the days with purpose while juggling the responsibilities of motherhood. Inspired by her mother's suggestion to personalize masks with a Cricket machine, Robbyn initially ventured into a market she soon found to be oversaturated. However, a serendipitous encounter on a Facebook group introduced her to the world of personalized balloons, igniting a spark of entrepreneurial creativity within her.

Armed with determination and a willingness to learn, Robbyn embarked on her balloon-styling journey. Starting small with personalized balloons, she quickly expanded her repertoire as demand grew, teaching herself balloon artistry techniques through YouTube tutorials. With her own funds and a dash of resourcefulness, Robbyn transformed her hobby into a thriving business.

Operating from Thunder Bay posed its own set of challenges and advantages. While the city's unique position allowed Robbyn to predict trends before

they hit, marketing her business proved to be a daunting task. Despite the struggle to reach her target audience efficiently, Robbyn remained undeterred, recognizing the untapped potential in Thunder Bay's smaller communities and niche markets.

As a woman entrepreneur, Robbyn faced additional hurdles in accessing capital. Navigating the maze of grant applications and stringent requirements proved discouraging, with the demands often outweighing the potential benefits. Robbyn advocated for streamlining the funding process, making it more accessible and less daunting for aspiring female entrepreneurs like herself.

Amidst the challenges, Robbyn found solace and support in her local community, particularly the Westfort neighborhood. The Business Association's outreach efforts and the embrace of younger members signaled a promising shift towards inclusivity and support for small businesses like Balloon Stylings.

Through perseverance, innovation, and the unwavering support of her community, Robbyn Fraser turned adversity into opportunity, proving that even in the face of uncertainty, dreams can take flight. Balloon Stylings became not just a business but a symbol of resilience and creativity in the heart of Thunder Bay, inspiring others to pursue their passions against all odds.



Maureen Mills - Salesman Consulting

Maureen Mills, a born-and-raised Thunder Bayer, embarked on her entrepreneurial journey with a vision to bridge gaps in businesses and organizations through her consulting venture, Salesman Consulting. Established in April 2023, Salesman Consulting offers short-term business solutions, ranging from project management to grant writing, catering to entities struggling with internal resource constraints. Maureen's business model, charging hourly for services, provides a flexible and cost-effective alternative to traditional hiring practices, particularly amidst labor shortages.

Starting her business from the comfort of her home, Maureen encountered minimal startup costs, primarily requiring a laptop to kickstart operations. However, funding proved to be a challenge as traditional grants and assistance programs often overlooked businesses without a brick-and-mortar presence. Undeterred, Maureen leveraged her own investments to finance her venture, determined to carve her niche in the consulting industry.

Despite the hurdles, Maureen found support in Thunder Bay's tight-knit community, where personal connections and word-of-mouth referrals fueled her business growth. The supportive network in her hometown provided a steady stream of clients, showcasing the power of organic networking in a smaller community.

Yet, Maureen recognized the systemic barriers faced by women entrepreneurs, particularly in accessing capital. The emphasis on brick-and-mortar establishments in grant applications disregarded the evolving landscape of remote work, leaving home-based businesses like hers at a disadvantage. Additionally, grants tailored for women often offered insufficient funding, highlighting the need for more equitable financial support mechanisms.

In the face of these challenges, Maureen remained pragmatic, prioritizing billable hours over the pursuit



of elusive funding opportunities. While acknowledging the importance of financial assistance, she emphasized the value of tangible work and client relationships in sustaining her business.

Reflecting on her journey, Maureen marveled at the overwhelming support from her community, especially from fellow women entrepreneurs. Thunder Bay's culture of camaraderie and encouragement fueled her determination to overcome obstacles, even as she grappled with the financial burdens of essential expenses like insurance and website maintenance.

As Salesman Consulting continued to thrive, Maureen remained a testament to the resilience and resourcefulness of women entrepreneurs. Her story echoed the challenges faced by many, yet her unwavering resolve and community support served as beacons of hope in the journey of entrepreneurship.



Donna Smith - Bain Smith Consulting

Donna Smith's journey in the world of business was one that mirrored the resilience and determination of Thunder Bay itself. As the founder and CEO of Bain Smith Consulting, Donna had built her financial advisory firm from the ground up over the past 18 years. Armed with her expertise as a CPA and CBV, Donna embarked on a solitary path, starting her venture with just herself working from a humble home office.

But Donna's vision was never confined by her surroundings. She saw potential where others might have seen limitations. Thunder Bay, though not typically associated with bustling business hubs, offered Donna something invaluable: flexibility. In those early years when her children were still young, Thunder Bay provided the space for her to balance the demands of entrepreneurship with the joys of motherhood. It allowed her to handpick projects that aligned with her expertise and interests, giving her a sense of fulfillment in her work.

Yet, Thunder Bay was not without its challenges. Situated far from the metropolitan areas of Southern Ontario, expanding Bain Smith Consulting's services beyond its regional boundaries proved to be a daunting task. The limited pool of educated and experienced staff posed another hurdle. Despite Thunder Bay's charm, it struggled to attract talent from the more populous regions to the

south. Donna found herself in fierce competition for the skilled professionals needed to scale her business.

But Donna was not one to dwell on barriers; she was a problem-solver by nature. While she hadn't faced the challenge of accessing external capital herself, she recognized the systemic issues hindering many women-founded companies. She understood that changing perceptions was crucial. By showcasing the successes of female-led businesses and highlighting the unique benefits they brought to the table, Donna believed funding agents could be better informed. She advocated for increased access to women investor groups and mentorship programs tailored to help businesses like hers break through to the next level.

Throughout her journey, Donna found herself surprised not by the obstacles she encountered, but by her own resilience in overcoming them. Self-funding her business had been a testament to her determination and resourcefulness. Thunder Bay had been more than just a backdrop; it had been a canvas upon which Donna painted her dreams, turning challenges into opportunities and setbacks into stepping stones toward success. As Bain Smith Consulting continued to thrive, Donna remained a beacon of inspiration for aspiring entrepreneurs, proving that with vision, perseverance, and a touch of Thunder Bay spirit, anything was possible.



Kristen Wall - Gallery 33

Kristen Wall's journey as an entrepreneur in Thunder Bay was a testament to perseverance, creativity, and the struggles faced by women business owners. Born and raised in the city she loved, Kristen took the helm of Gallery 33, a local art gallery and studio, with a vision to showcase the talent of Thunder Bay's artists while nurturing creativity within the community.

Taking over an established business seemed like a smooth transition, but Kristen quickly encountered the harsh reality of funding challenges. Despite the gallery's existing name, accessing capital proved to be a daunting task. Traditional avenues required extensive workshops and business plans, a luxury Kristen couldn't afford while simultaneously running the business. Banks demanded two years of business activity, leaving her in a perpetual cycle of financial strain.

Yet, amidst the hurdles, Kristen found solace in the advantages Thunder Bay offered to business owners. The city's close-knit community allowed her to tailor her business to local tastes and needs, catering to both tourists and residents alike. However, she recognized the need for more support in promoting Thunder Bay's unique offerings, especially against the backdrop of online retail giants.

Advertising emerged as a significant challenge for Kristen. The cost of traditional media outlets posed a financial strain, forcing her to navigate alternative, cost-effective methods to reach potential customers. As a young woman in business, Kristen felt the weight of ageism and gender bias, facing skepticism and condescension in her pursuit of financial assistance.

Reflecting on her experience during the pandemic, Kristen highlighted the resilience and resourcefulness of women entrepreneurs. Despite being overlooked for assistance due to the size of



her business, she persevered, relying on her part-time job to keep Gallery 33 afloat. The lack of support from traditional financial institutions pushed her to seek unconventional means of funding, often turning to family and friends for assistance.

In Kristen's eyes, the key to empowering women entrepreneurs lies in providing access to capital without stringent requirements. She emphasized the importance of representation in financial institutions, advocating for women in positions of influence who understand the unique challenges faced by female business owners.

Kristen's story echoed the struggles of many women entrepreneurs striving to navigate a system that often overlooks their potential. Yet, through determination and ingenuity, she continued to champion local art and creativity, leaving an indelible mark on Thunder Bay's cultural landscape.

Heidi Sherlock - Heidi's Home Daycare

Heidi Sherlock was more than just a home daycare provider; she was a beacon of nurturing care and educational guidance for children in Thunder Bay. Her journey as an entrepreneur began with a simple desire: to earn income while staying home with her own children. With a background in teaching, Heidi found solace in the idea of shaping young minds in the comfort of her own home.

Starting her business in 2006 was not without its challenges. On her first day, overwhelmed with emotions, she questioned her ability to handle the responsibility. Yet, Heidi persevered, gradually growing her daycare to accommodate five children. Despite a setback caused by personal loss, she found support from the Home Childcare Network, a group of fellow providers who offered guidance and camaraderie.

Financing her venture was solely her responsibility. Without any external funding, Heidi relied on her own resources and determination. She set her prices, utilized her existing supplies, and embarked on her entrepreneurial journey with resilience.

Thunder Bay offered Heidi the advantage of a tight-knit community and a high demand for childcare services. She quickly gained clients and felt the warmth of positive feedback and support. However,

the city's limitations, such as its smaller population and standard pricing, posed challenges.

Heidi's biggest struggle, though, stemmed from the lack of support for home daycare providers. The city's subsidies favored larger daycare centers, leaving home-based businesses like hers at a disadvantage. Despite the critical role they played in supporting working parents, home daycares received no financial assistance or recognition for their contributions.

In advocating for change, Heidi proposed initiatives to support women-founded businesses and expand childcare options. She believed that increasing funding, lessening restrictions on home daycares and providing startup support would not only empower women but also alleviate the childcare burden for families.

Yet, amidst the challenges, Heidi found a surprising revelation in the varying levels of appreciation from parents. While some expressed immense gratitude, others failed to acknowledge the dedication and effort she invested in their children's upbringing. Despite this, Heidi remained steadfast in her commitment to providing quality care and education.

Heidi's story was one of resilience, passion, and a relentless pursuit of empowering both children and women in her community. As she continued her journey, she hoped for a future where women entrepreneurs like her would receive the support and recognition they rightfully deserved.



Hailey Hollinsworth - Ungalli

Hailey Hollinsworth's journey from a small startup in Toronto to the helm of a sustainable clothing empire in Thunder Bay, Ontario, is a testament to grit, innovation, and the power of community support. As the co-founder of Ungalli, Hailey's story is one of perseverance and passion for sustainability.

Eleven years ago, Hailey and her sister Bree embarked on their entrepreneurial journey, joining the Co-Starter program at the Northwestern Ontario Innovation Center. They were among the program's first cohort, laying the foundation for what would become Ungalli. With determination and a bootstrap mentality, they forged ahead, self-funding their business and securing a significant grant from Shell Canada along the way.

Their decision to base Ungalli in Thunder Bay was strategic. Hailey had initially started the business in Toronto but found the market saturated and the competition fierce. In Thunder Bay, they discovered a supportive community with fewer startups vying for attention. While funding opportunities were limited, the sense of collaboration and local support buoyed their spirits.

However, Hailey acknowledges the challenges of operating a business in a remote location. With all manufacturing conducted in Southern Ontario, logistical hurdles like shipping costs and travel time posed significant obstacles. Yet, she remains undeterred, leveraging the power of online platforms to reach customers beyond geographical boundaries.

Navigating the landscape of funding as a woman-owned business presented its own set of challenges. Hailey observed a potential barrier in the form of a lack of knowledge and confidence among female entrepreneurs. Despite this, she was surprised by the breadth of funding options available and the interest shown by venture capitalists, albeit after



establishing credibility over several years of operation.

Hailey's journey with Ungalli is a testament to the resilience of women entrepreneurs and the transformative impact of sustainable business practices. Through innovation, collaboration, and a steadfast commitment to their vision, she and her sister have not only built a successful brand but also paved the way for a more conscious approach to fashion in Thunder Bay and beyond. As they continue to grow and evolve, their story serves as an inspiration to aspiring entrepreneurs everywhere.



Alessandra DeGrazia - MRTMarkers

Alessandra DeGrazia was not your typical entrepreneur. By day, she worked tirelessly as a Medical Radiation Technologist at the Thunder Bay Regional Health Sciences Center, ensuring patients received the care they needed. But her entrepreneurial spirit burned brightly beneath her lab coat, driving her to pursue a passion project that would eventually blossom into MRTMarkers.

Her journey began like many others: with a problem that needed solving. As she navigated her career, Alessandra noticed a glaring gap in the market – there were no Canadian-based businesses offering custom-designed X-ray markers. Determined to fill this void, she dove headfirst into the world of entrepreneurship, armed with nothing but her drive and a thirst for innovation.

Starting a business was uncharted territory for Alessandra. Her education had prepared her for a career in healthcare, not commerce. But she was undeterred. With sheer determination and a willingness to learn, she taught herself the ins and outs of entrepreneurship. Hours of research and countless YouTube tutorials later, she had built a functioning website from scratch – a testament to her grit and resourcefulness.

Yet, funding remained a formidable obstacle.

Working part-time at the hospital meant Alessandra had limited financial resources to invest in her venture. It wasn't until she enrolled in the Co-Starter program at the Innovation Centre that she realized the true impact funding could have on her business.

With hindsight as her guide, Alessandra acknowledged the missed opportunities and inefficiencies that stemmed from her initial lack of capital.

Despite the challenges, Alessandra found solace in Thunder Bay's close-knit community. In a city where everyone knew everyone, collaboration and support were abundant. Through local partnerships and

grassroots networking, she found allies who believed in her vision and championed her cause.

But as with any journey, there were obstacles along the way. Thunder Bay's modest population posed a challenge for scaling her business. Limited demand meant Alessandra had to think outside the box to reach a wider audience beyond her hometown's borders.

And then there were the systemic barriers faced by women entrepreneurs. Gender biases and a lack of funding options for retail-based businesses posed significant hurdles for Alessandra and others like her. Yet, she remained undaunted, advocating for greater education and mentorship to level the playing field.

Throughout it all, Alessandra was continually surprised by the stringent requirements of funding applications. The hoops she had to jump through seemed insurmountable at times, leaving her questioning the accessibility of capital for budding entrepreneurs.

But Alessandra was not one to back down from a challenge. Armed with resilience, determination, and a passion for her craft, she forged ahead, determined to carve out her own path in the world of entrepreneurship. And with each obstacle she overcame, Alessandra's story served as a beacon of hope for aspiring women entrepreneurs everywhere, proving that with unwavering perseverance, anything was possible.



Anna Mauro - Northwest

Anna Mauro, the visionary entrepreneur behind Northwest store at Intercity Shopping Center in Thunder Bay, embodies the essence of retail prowess and resilience. With over four decades of experience in the retail landscape, Anna's journey is a testament to her unwavering passion and relentless pursuit of success.

Northwest is not just a retail outlet; it's a culmination of Anna's lifelong dedication to the art of retail. From her humble beginnings to her current status as a revered business owner, Anna's entrepreneurial spirit shines through every facet of her enterprise. Her expertise extends beyond the confines of a single storefront, as she orchestrates a series of pop-up stores within Intercity Shopping Center, each showcasing her keen eye for retail innovation.

Yet, Anna's journey hasn't been without its challenges, particularly in the realm of funding and recognition. As a seasoned entrepreneur, she recalls the hurdles she faced in securing capital, often overshadowed by archaic biases and gender stereotypes. Despite her wealth of experience and proven track record, Anna found herself navigating through a maze of institutional barriers, from banks insisting on spousal cosigners to real estate agents overlooking her presence in business negotiations.

However, Anna remains undeterred, steadfast in her mission to shatter stereotypes and pave the way for aspiring women entrepreneurs. She recognizes the importance of mentorship and peer support in navigating the complex landscape of funding opportunities. With her sights set on fostering a community of empowered women entrepreneurs, Anna advocates for mentorship programs and buddy systems to provide guidance and support to those embarking on their entrepreneurial journey.

In her quest for success, Anna's resourcefulness and ingenuity shine brightly. From negotiating flexible

rent agreements to leveraging creative credit card strategies, she embodies the spirit of resilience and adaptability. Her ability to think outside the box, even in the wee hours of the morning, underscores her unwavering commitment to her craft.

As Anna reflects on her journey, she remains grateful for the lessons learned and the challenges overcome. From securing prime retail fixtures at bargain prices to navigating the intricacies of funding applications, every obstacle has fueled her determination to succeed.

Anna's commitment to supporting women entrepreneurs extends beyond her own journey; she envisions a community where mentorship and peer support flourish. Recognizing the daunting nature of funding applications and the labyrinth of bureaucratic processes, Anna advocates for a mentorship ecosystem where successful women entrepreneurs lend their expertise to guide and empower those just starting out. She envisions volunteer mentors, retired business owners, and a buddy system where seasoned entrepreneurs provide one-on-one support to newcomers, helping them navigate the complexities of accessing capital with confidence and clarity. Through these mentorship initiatives, Anna seeks to foster a culture of collaboration and empowerment, where women uplift and inspire each other to reach new heights of success in the business world.

Anna Mauro's story is more than just a tale of retail entrepreneurship; it's a testament to the indomitable spirit of women in business. Through her resilience, resourcefulness, and unwavering passion, Anna inspires a new generation of entrepreneurs to dare to dream and defy the odds.

Rhonda Bill - A Fine Fit Catering & Consulting

Rhonda, the culinary wizard behind A Fine Fit Catering & Consulting, is not just a chef; she's a seasoned entrepreneur with a knack for balancing her passion for food with her family life. Armed with a Professional Cook's certification, a Red Seal Chef designation, and a Bachelor's degree in elementary education, Rhonda embarked on her entrepreneurial journey in 2010.

With the invaluable assistance of PARO Entrepreneur Centre, Rhonda navigated the intricacies of business planning, financial projections, and funding sources. This support paved the way for her to establish a home-based business model, enabling her to manage overhead costs efficiently while maintaining the flexibility to prioritize her family commitments. Even as her family grew, Rhonda seamlessly integrated her business responsibilities with her maternal duties, thanks to the freedom her business structure afforded her.

Rhonda's resilience and resourcefulness were further demonstrated during the pandemic when she secured funding from the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund Corporation (NOHFC) to weather the storm and sustain her business operations.

Operating in Thunder Bay, Rhonda capitalizes on the city's favorable municipal laws that accommodate home-based catering businesses. Her City License and Health Unit Food Safety grade not only ensure compliance but also instill confidence in her clientele.

However, Rhonda acknowledges the challenges inherent in catering to a niche market in a relatively small community like Thunder Bay. Despite her expertise in specialty catering, such as accommodating diverse dietary needs and nutritional preferences, the limited customer base constrains her ability to specialize further. Yet, she remains adaptable, offering a diverse range of



culinary services to cater to varying tastes and requirements.

As a woman entrepreneur, Rhonda is acutely aware of the barriers women face in accessing capital. She believes that misconceptions about women's commitment and perceived riskiness may hinder their access to funding. Nonetheless, she advocates for organizations like PARO Centre, which actively support women entrepreneurs in navigating funding avenues.

Reflecting on her funding journey, Rhonda confesses to being pleasantly surprised by the myriad opportunities that emerged. The support from NOHFC, in particular, proved instrumental in fueling her business growth, exceeding her initial expectations.

Through Rhonda's story, it becomes evident that with determination, strategic support, and a sprinkle of surprise funding opportunities, women entrepreneurs like her can turn their culinary dreams into thriving businesses, one delectable dish at a time.



Liana Frenette - TBT Engineering

In the bustling heart of Thunder Bay, nestled amidst the rugged beauty of Northwestern Ontario, stands TBT Engineering Limited, a beacon of innovation and resilience in the world of consulting engineering. At its helm is Liana Frenette, a visionary entrepreneur with a tale as inspiring as the landscape that surrounds her.

Liana's journey with TBT Engineering began in 1995 when she took the bold leap to purchase the small testing lab, then a modest venture in its infancy. With determination as her compass and her grandfather's unwavering support as her anchor, Liana embarked on a quest to turn this fledgling enterprise into a powerhouse of engineering excellence.

Funding the purchase was no small feat. With a co-signed loan from her grandfather and the guidance of a trusted accountant, who believed in her vision enough to defer payment until the business thrived, Liana navigated the labyrinth of financial challenges. The Bank of Nova Scotia provided the crucial funds, with Liana and her team personally guaranteeing everything they owned. In those early days, sacrifices were abundant – Liana forgoing a salary, relying on her husband's income, and borrowing from family and institutions like the Business Development Bank of Canada (BDC) to secure essential equipment.

Yet, adversity only fueled Liana's determination. She weathered the storms of uncertainty, transforming TBT Engineering into a multidisciplinary engineering powerhouse. Through strategic acquisitions and unwavering commitment, TBT Engineering expanded its footprint, reaching communities far beyond Thunder Bay. In 2023, the opening of their Collingwood office marked a new chapter in their journey, a testament to their enduring legacy of excellence.

But Liana's vision extends beyond business success.

With a majority ownership now in the hands of women, TBT Engineering stands as a beacon of diversity and inclusion in a traditionally male-dominated industry. In 2015, Liana spearheaded the acquisition of Profor Engineering Services Limited, enriching TBT Engineering's expertise with Mechanical and Electrical Engineering Consulting disciplines. Subsequent expansions bolstered TBT Engineering's presence, reinforcing its commitment to Indigenous engagement and collaboration.

In Thunder Bay's tight-knit community, Liana found both solace and challenges. The remoteness of the region offered advantages, making TBTE a local cornerstone of expertise and accessibility. Yet, staffing remained a persistent hurdle, as attracting and retaining talent proved challenging amidst competition from larger organizations.

As a woman in business, Liana confronted the biases that plague female entrepreneurs seeking capital. Despite her proven track record and unwavering determination, she encountered the entrenched perception that women lacked competency in business. Yet, she remained undeterred, advocating for greater representation of women in boardrooms and highlighting success stories to dismantle prevailing biases.

Reflecting on her journey, Liana admits to the surprising paradox of accessing capital. The arduous struggle to secure funds when most needed contrasted sharply with the ease of obtaining financial support during times of abundance.

Through it all, Liana Frenette's story embodies the spirit of resilience and determination that defines Thunder Bay's entrepreneurial landscape.

Denise Atkinson - Tea Horse

Denise Atkinson, an Anishinaabe entrepreneur hailing from the Red Rock Indian Band in Northwestern Ontario, has charted a remarkable journey from her traditional upbringing to becoming a beacon of Indigenous entrepreneurship. With over two decades of experience in the federal public service, Denise transitioned into the realm of business, driven by her commitment to advancing Indigenous Peoples and their economies.

Founding Tea Horse, an Indigenous woman-owned artisanal tea and wild rice company, Denise introduced ManoominCha™, the first-of-its-kind wild rice tea crafted through a proprietary roasting process. This fusion of flavors not only celebrates Indigenous culture but also offers a healthy beverage alternative free from sugar, artificial sweeteners, or preservatives.

Denise's involvement in various Indigenous and non-Indigenous business networks underscores her dedication to fostering economic reconciliation. Through organizations like CAMSC, CCAB, and IWBNI, she leverages her expertise to promote Indigenous entrepreneurship on a broader scale.

In Thunder Bay, where Tea Horse is based, Denise finds both advantages and challenges. The city's abundant business resources and supportive network enable entrepreneurs to thrive. Yet, logistical hurdles like high freight costs and limited access to processing facilities present ongoing challenges.

For women-founded companies, accessing capital remains a significant barrier. Denise, as an Indigenous woman, faces unique obstacles compounded by the systemic categorization of Indigenous Peoples. Government funding often overlooks individual off-reserve entrepreneurs, emphasizing collective initiatives over individual enterprises.

To address these barriers, Denise advocates for



increased women's representation in leadership roles. By bringing a gender lens to decision-making processes, she believes there's a greater chance of facilitating access to capital. Additionally, creating supportive networks for women entrepreneurs fosters capacity-building and resilience.

Denise's experience with funding her business revealed a surprising shift. Transitioning from tea reselling to agri-food production unlocked new avenues for grants and support programs. This pivot underscores the importance of adaptability and innovation in navigating the entrepreneurial landscape.

Denise Atkinson's journey exemplifies resilience, innovation, and a steadfast commitment to Indigenous economic empowerment. Through Tea Horse, she not only celebrates Indigenous culture but also paves the way for future generations of entrepreneurs to thrive.



Jenni Ritchie - Superior Bakes

Nestled in the heart of Northwestern Ontario, Superior Bakes stands as a testament to entrepreneurship and resilience. We sat down with Jenni to unravel the story behind the brand that's making waves in Thunder Bay and beyond.

Jenni, the driving force behind Superior Bakes, initially embarked on her culinary adventure with no grand visions of entrepreneurship. "It all started as a hobby at our local farmers market," she shares. The transition from a small-scale market venture to a business distributing products across Northwestern Ontario and even reaching national shelves via e-commerce was a journey that caught her by surprise.

"For the first two years, we operated as a sole proprietorship, entirely self-funded," Jenni recounts. The business model was simple yet effective – buy groceries, sell products, repeat. It was a cycle that sustained Superior Bakes until 2020 when they officially incorporated.

Delving into the advantages of being a business owner in Thunder Bay, Jenni points to the tight-knit community as an invaluable asset. "Thunder Bay's closeness has been crucial for networking and support," she explains. Collaborating with local entrepreneurs, like partnering with Emily's Bread for distribution, has played a pivotal role in Superior Bakes' success.

Yet, Jenni candidly addresses the geographical challenges that small businesses face. "In a small community like Thunder Bay, getting into big grocery stores is amazing, but logistically, we're at a disadvantage," she acknowledges.

The conversation takes a twist as Jenni shares insights into the hurdles faced when selling on Amazon. "If we're going to ship a product to Amazon, it's going to take at least a week to get the product to a fulfillment center," she reveals.

Switching gears, we dive into the topic of capital for women entrepreneurs. Jenni emphasizes the need for a broader perspective on business success. "Women bring different factors to the table, especially in marketing and brand appeal," she asserts. Reflecting on her experience

with grants, she acknowledges their crucial role in expanding her business. Jenni's journey with Superior Bakes has been buoyed by strategic access to grants instrumental in the growth and innovation of her health-focused food business. Through initiatives like Next Level, and Youth Effect that Jenni accessed through Northwestern Ontario Innovation Center and grants like the Northern Ontario Export, and the Growth Market Ontario, they acted as catalysts for transformative projects. These grants have not only provided financial support but have been pivotal in facilitating crucial aspects of business development. Notably, the grants played a central role in executing a self-life study for one of Superior Bakes' products, a project that might not have been feasible without external funding.

As we discuss ways to enhance support for women entrepreneurs, Jenni proposes a monthly newsletter listing available grants to bridge the information gap. "If you don't know that there is a grant out there, you don't apply," she notes.

The conversation takes an unexpected turn when we touch upon Jenni's recent revelations about payroll. The wage increase, while deserved, prompted her to reevaluate the importance of maximizing staff productivity. It's a nuanced aspect of business management that Jenni admits caught her off guard, emphasizing the delicate balance between employee satisfaction and business sustainability.

Through the highs and lows, Jenni's journey with Superior Bakes epitomizes the dynamic landscape of entrepreneurship. In Thunder Bay, where the community spirit is as essential as the products themselves, Jenni continues to navigate the business horizon, proving that success is a mix of passion, collaboration, and the occasional unexpected ingredient.



Suzanne Christie - Shout Media

Suzanne Christie's journey from the grassroots of entrepreneurship to the thriving helm of Shout Media is a testament to the resilience and determination that defines women entrepreneurs. As the CEO of Shout Media, Suzanne embarked on her entrepreneurial adventure with little more than a dream and a meager capital. Yet, her tenacity propelled her to grow the business organically, reinvesting every hard-earned dollar back into the company.

Only two years into her entrepreneurial odyssey did Suzanne start paying herself. Those initial years were marked by an unwavering focus on building a foundation for Shout Media, ensuring its stability and sustainability. As the company became established, Suzanne strategically leveraged lines of credit and tapped into Northern Heritage funding for her employees, solidifying Shout Media's position in the market.

Thunder Bay, the community that witnessed Suzanne's entrepreneurial ascent, played a pivotal role in shaping her journey. In a city where local businesses support each other with a "you scratch my back, I'll scratch yours" mentality, Suzanne found a unique advantage. Thunder Bay's Goldilocks size, not too big and not too small, proved to be the ideal landscape for startups and scaleups. The access to funding, particularly in a northern community, further fueled Shout Media's growth.

However, Suzanne acknowledges that challenges persist, particularly when dealing with counterparts in larger metropolitan areas. The perception of being a "small-town" entrepreneur can be a barrier, with some assuming a lack of knowledge about broader business challenges. Finding like-minded individuals within her space also presented a challenge, a scarcity that became evident during conferences in larger centers.

The interview also sheds light on the broader issue

of capital accessibility for women-founded companies. Suzanne observes that capital often begets more capital, creating a cycle that is challenging to break into. This struggle, however, is not exclusive to women entrepreneurs but is a shared hurdle for small businesses in general. The difficulty lies not only in obtaining funding but also in navigating the complex landscape of available opportunities, a time-consuming task that poses a significant challenge for small businesses with limited resources.

Suzanne proposes a solution to bridge this gap. She emphasizes the importance of outreach and assistance during the funding application process, recognizing the daunting nature of these procedures. Supporting women entrepreneurs in navigating these challenges is crucial, ensuring that they have equal access to the opportunities available.

In a surprising twist, Suzanne reflects on a transformative moment in her entrepreneurial journey. The realization that charging what Shout Media was truly worth, without compromising on value, brought about a profound shift. She admits that, perhaps influenced by societal expectations, there was a reluctance to charge a premium. Once this barrier was broken, and invoicing was handled by someone else, Shout Media became significantly more profitable.

Suzanne's story is one of breaking through barriers, challenging perceptions, and unlocking the true potential of a business. It's an inspiring narrative that showcases the grit of women entrepreneurs and the transformative power of charging what one is truly worth.

Pam Tallon - myLocalism

Pam Tallon, a woman of remarkable credentials, spearheads multiple small businesses, with her largest venture being myLocalism, an innovative local online marketplace aimed at invigorating the local economy. However, her journey in securing funding for her ventures paints a stark picture of the barriers women entrepreneurs face in accessing capital.

Despite her extensive qualifications, Pam found herself resorting to self-funding and personal equity to fuel her entrepreneurial dreams. Reflecting on her experience, she highlights the systemic biases that hinder women in the entrepreneurial landscape. Pam laments the exclusionary nature of traditional funding avenues, which often overlook women-led startups. She criticizes the tokenism of specialized funding options, which, though intended to support underrepresented groups, often come with burdensome requirements and paltry sums that do little to foster real growth.

The scarcity of resources took its toll on Pam's ventures, halting progress when her self-funded reserves dried up. She emphasizes the inherent challenges of scaling a business without adequate financial backing, especially when faced with the exorbitant costs of skilled personnel.

In the tight-knit community of Thunder Bay, where Pam operates, she finds solace in the strong sense of solidarity among local businesses. However, she also acknowledges the limitations of operating in a smaller market, where access to external opportunities for growth is constrained by perceptions of regional insignificance.

When asked about the biggest barriers for women-founded companies in accessing capital, Pam doesn't mince her words. She points to deeply ingrained sexism that permeates investment decisions, from all-male panels favoring male entrepreneurs to societal expectations that burden women with disproportionate caregiving responsibilities, leaving them with less time to dedicate to their ventures. Moreover, the financial landscape itself is stacked against women, with the insidious "pink tax" exacerbating the already existing gender pay gap.



In the face of these challenges, Pam advocates for tangible solutions to level the playing field. She calls for gender parity on funding panels to ensure fair evaluation, urging for an end to the theatrics of funding processes that often resemble reality TV shows. She stresses the importance of tailoring funding opportunities to suit the needs and realities of women-led businesses, rather than perpetuating a system that caters primarily to male-dominated industries.

Reflecting on her journey, Pam finds herself surprised by the narrow scope of available funding options, which often fail to accommodate the diverse needs of modern businesses. Her experience underscores the urgency of addressing systemic biases and reforming funding structures to foster inclusivity and empower women entrepreneurs to thrive in an equitable business landscape.



Stephanie Ash - Firedog Communications

Stephanie Ash's journey as the CEO and President of Firedog Communications Inc. is a testament to resilience and determination in the face of daunting challenges. Arriving in Canada from England in 2003 with nothing but a dream, Stephanie embarked on her entrepreneurial odyssey despite facing unique obstacles due to her immigrant status.

Starting and funding her business was no small feat for Stephanie. With no credit history in Canada and limited access to financing, she found herself navigating a labyrinth of barriers. Unable to secure typical business essentials like a phone line or office space without hefty security deposits, Stephanie turned to the Thunder Bay & District Entrepreneur Centre for guidance on navigating the intricacies of starting a business in a new country.

For Stephanie, the early years of Firedog were marked by financial struggles and isolation. Working nights and weekends in a bar to cover living and business expenses, she faced the daunting task of building her venture without the safety net of personal savings or familial support. The absence of established connections in Thunder Bay compounded her challenges, highlighting the importance of community and networking in the entrepreneurial journey.

Despite the uphill battle, Stephanie found solace in Thunder Bay's tight-knit business community. The city's smaller scale facilitated meaningful connections and easier access to networking opportunities, albeit with the caveat that impressions mattered more in a close-knit environment.

Over the years, Thunder Bay's entrepreneurial landscape evolved, offering a plethora of services and support for business owners. However, challenges persist, particularly in market size and transportation costs. Stephanie highlights the prohibitive nature of shipping and travel expenses,

especially for businesses like hers in the professional services sector.

As a woman entrepreneur, Stephanie is acutely aware of the gender disparities that persist in accessing capital. Women often face hurdles stemming from interrupted career paths and lack of personal seed funds, leading to reliance on unsustainable financing methods. She advocates for innovative funding models and increased financial planning support to empower women entrepreneurs to access capital more effectively.

Reflecting on her funding journey, Stephanie acknowledges initial hesitations about working with investors and accessing capital. However, she's surprised by how swiftly time has passed and the growth opportunities that arose from strategic financial partnerships.

Stephanie Ash's story is one of perseverance, resourcefulness, and a testament to the transformative power of entrepreneurship in overcoming adversity. Through her experiences, she underscores the importance of community support, networking, and innovative approaches to financing in paving the way for entrepreneurial success.



Kendall Williams - Lewk Clothing

Kendall Williams, a dynamic entrepreneur and co-owner of Lewk clothing, sat down with us to share her inspiring journey in establishing an inclusive women's clothing boutique in the vibrant Westport neighborhood of Thunder Bay.

The story of Lewk began to unfold in November 2022 when Kendall and her business partner, Melissa McClement, decided to turn their long-discussed dream into reality. Faced with the challenge of limited grants available for retail businesses, they pooled their resources in the initial stages and later secured a traditional loan to fund essential improvements. The decision to embark on this entrepreneurial adventure was driven by a desire to make a mark in the world of fashion and bring inclusivity to the forefront of their boutique.

In the heart of Thunder Bay, Kendall discovered a supportive ecosystem for business owners. Drawing from her experience in economic development, she emphasized the strength of connections and the ease of accessing support in the community. The city's business owners rallied together, fostering a sense of unity over competition, building neighborhoods, supporting the BIA, and embracing a strong "support local" mindset.

However, with every journey come challenges, and for Kendall and Melissa, being in the retail industry posed unique geographical hurdles. Thunder Bay's remote location and facing a six-season fashion calendar, requiring multiple trips to major fashion hubs like Toronto and Montreal each year. This not only incurred significant travel costs but also took them away from their business for days at a time. Despite these challenges, the duo adapted by embracing virtual solutions for inventory procurement.

The geographical isolation also presented hurdles in obtaining supplies promptly. When an item ran out and needed to be shipped, Kendall and Melissa had to factor in an extended wait time due to the absence of local vendors. Yet, the smaller market in Thunder Bay had its benefits, offering less competition and room for growth within the niche they had carved out.

Delving into the broader challenges faced by women



entrepreneurs, Kendall highlighted the barriers in accessing capital, especially for those in retail or service-based businesses. Existing funding programs often overlooked women in these sectors, creating a gap in financial support. The traditional limitations of grants for product-oriented businesses left many women-founded companies struggling to secure the funding they needed to thrive.

When asked about potential solutions, Kendall proposed tailored grant programs for women, providing much-needed financial support. She also underscored the importance of accessible programs designed specifically for women entrepreneurs. While acknowledging the support they received from the Starter Company Program and Digital Main Street, Kendall expressed concerns about the disparity in funding amounts for retail businesses, making the application process seem disproportionately labor-intensive for the returns.

In essence, Kendall's journey with Lewk clothing is a testament to the resilience and determination of women entrepreneurs. Despite facing challenges unique to their industry and location, Kendall and Melissa have built a thriving business that not only caters to the fashion needs of Thunder Bay but also stands as a symbol of the strength of community support and the potential for growth even in seemingly isolated markets. As they continue to shape the narrative of Lewk, Kendall's insights shed light on the larger conversation around empowering and supporting women in business.



Kiersten Mosley - For Users' Sake

Kiersten Mosley, a passionate entrepreneur based in Thunder Bay, is on a mission to empower women in the business world. As the founder of For Users' Sake and FUS Academy, she has dedicated her efforts to supporting women entrepreneurs in building their businesses from the ground up. Her story sheds light on both the opportunities and challenges that women face in the entrepreneurial landscape.

Kiersten's journey began with a vision to assist women in realizing their business dreams. For Users' Sake focuses on various aspects, from conceptualizing ideas to crafting brands, building websites, and even enhancing social media presence. FUS Academy, her upcoming venture, aims to provide online courses, guiding women through the phases of business development, starting from ideation to implementation. The courses will be a lifeline for those lacking financial resources, emphasizing a learn-and-build approach.

In her startup experience, Kiersten highlighted the crucial role played by the Thunder Bay community. The CEDC's Starter Plus Program provided her not only with a \$5,000 grant but also mentorship and networking opportunities. Thunder Bay's collaborative atmosphere, especially through organizations like PARO, CEDC, and NOIC, offers a unique advantage for entrepreneurs, enabling them to connect, learn, and grow.

However, despite the supportive ecosystem, Kiersten acknowledged the challenges of running a business in Thunder Bay. The limited market size and niche client base pose obstacles to scaling within the city. To overcome this, Kiersten emphasized the need to explore opportunities outside Thunder Bay, leveraging remote work and the potential reach of online platforms like FUS Academy.

As a woman entrepreneur, Kiersten shared her

experiences seeking funding. She pointed out the disparities in understanding and support when dealing with male-dominated industries. The challenges women face, often rooted in unique perspectives and solutions, can be misunderstood. Kiersten emphasized the importance of having female counterparts in funding discussions to bridge this gap.

Addressing the barriers preventing women-founded companies from accessing capital, Kiersten emphasized the need for individuals who understand the female perspective in decision-making roles. Additionally, she stressed the importance of financial education for women entrepreneurs to build positive credit histories, enabling them to navigate the complex world of business financing.

Reflecting on her own entrepreneurial journey, Kiersten found both encouragement and frustration. While grants during the COVID-19 pandemic provided a lifeline, their limitations in size raised questions about sustained growth. She expressed concern about the future support for businesses post-pandemic, wondering how entrepreneurs like her will continue to thrive.

Despite the challenges, Kiersten draws strength from women's networks and the camaraderie they provide. These networks offer a safe space for shared experiences, collaboration, and mentorship, fostering a sense of community among women entrepreneurs. Kiersten's story underscores the importance of not only breaking down barriers but also building supportive networks that uplift and empower women in business.



Vic Moss - Mosswood Adventures

In the heart of Kenora, where the rhythm of lake life sets the tone, Vic Moss found her passion and carved her path as the founder of Mosswood Adventures and Rentals. Her journey from a bustling city to the tranquil shores of Kenora unveiled both challenges and triumphs, weaving a tale of resilience and innovation.

Mosswood Adventures and Rentals, a woman-owned eco-tourism adventure and rental service business, emerged as Kenora's newest tourism gem. Vic Moss, the visionary behind the venture, embarked on a unique odyssey fueled by determination and a commitment to bring something fresh to the community.

The hurdles in the early days were daunting, but Vic navigated them with grace. Initiating the business required not just vision but financial backing, and Vic turned to the Northwest Business Centre for support. Through the Starter Company Plus program, she meticulously crafted a business plan and pitched her idea, emerging victorious with a \$5,000 grant that became the cornerstone of Mosswood Adventures and Rentals.

Yet, the journey didn't stop there. Vic sought funding from various avenues, including the Tourism Innovation Lab's Spark Mentorship and Grant program, Northern Ontario Women (NOW) program and the Digital Main Street Shop Here program, allowing her to revamp the business website and accelerate growth. The NWO Pitch It competition provided a pivotal moment, injecting the necessary cash to extend Mosswood Adventures and Rentals into the summer season. The path was not always smooth, and not every grant application bore fruit, but each success and setback shaped the trajectory of the business.

Kenora, with its open-minded community, became a canvas for Vic's aspirations. Coming from a larger city, she saw opportunities to fill industry gaps and introduce novel ideas. The city's size, though, presented its own set of challenges. Gossip thrived, especially when a new business entered the scene. Vic learned to tread carefully, listening internally, understanding the community's pulse, but also forging her own path.

Change, she realized, is uncomfortable, but it's the catalyst for progress.

Breaking into the business scene in a small city wasn't without obstacles, yet Vic overcame them by immersing herself in the community. Joining and creating business groups, networking, and finding the right connections transformed initial challenges into lifelong support.

As a woman entrepreneur, Vic faced a distinctive set of barriers, especially in accessing capital. While grateful for the funding she received, she acknowledged the systemic hurdles. Requirements for grants often clashed with the reality of women's lives—primarily as homemakers and active parents. Vic advocated for a shift in perspective, urging for more seeded funding, flexibility, and acknowledgment of diverse business models.

To support women entrepreneurs in accessing capital, Vic proposed thinking beyond conventional grant criteria. Recognizing that not every project aligns with typical priorities, she championed a more inclusive approach, accommodating sole proprietorships and smaller grant amounts. Moreover, she emphasized the need for flexible learning opportunities, and understanding the unique schedules of women juggling business and family life.

Reflecting on her journey, Vic expressed surprise at the progress she made. Balancing doubt, familial responsibilities, and the demands of the funding process, she emerged stronger and more adept at navigating the intricacies of entrepreneurship. Mosswood Adventures and Rentals stands not just as a testament to Vic's determination but as an inspiration for aspiring women entrepreneurs facing barriers in the business world. With every challenge conquered, Vic Moss has paved the way for others to follow, leaving an indelible mark on the landscape of women-led businesses in Kenora.



Erin Sisko - Elleiance Network

Once upon a time in the picturesque city of Thunder Bay, Erin Sisko embarked on a journey that would redefine her life and the lives of women entrepreneurs across Canada. Her tale begins with a passion for supporting women in business, a desire that took root during her tenure at the Business Development Bank of Canada.

While still immersed in her full-time corporate job, Erin felt a calling to do more. She noticed a common struggle among women entrepreneurs — the challenge of making the right connections. This realization inspired her to create something extraordinary. Thus, The Elleiance Network, a membership-based business mastermind network for Canadian women entrepreneurs, was born.

Erin initially started a free group, reaching out to women in her network. Unexpectedly, this group evolved into a powerful force that resonated with the hearts and souls of women across Thunder Bay. The unexpected success prompted Erin to take a leap of faith, leaving her corporate job in September 2021 to nurture and grow The Elleiance Network full-time.

The magic of Thunder Bay played a significant role in Erin's entrepreneurial journey. The city's isolation worked to their advantage — a tight-knit community where support flowed seamlessly. Erin's network flourished organically, spreading through word of mouth and referrals. Thunder Bay, with its population of around 100,000, proved that community support could be the driving force behind a business's success.

However, every fairy tale has its challenges. Erin recognized that while Thunder Bay was an excellent place to start a business, scaling posed difficulties due to the city's isolation. To overcome this, Erin devised a growth strategy that extended beyond Thunder Bay, encompassing the entire country.

As Erin continued to shape her narrative, the plot thickened with the question of funding. The challenges women entrepreneurs face in accessing capital became a central theme. Erin, having navigated the lending world for years, understood the time and

energy required for traditional funding applications. The demanding process often discouraged women, juggling myriad priorities, from pursuing traditional funding streams.

In response to this, Erin envisioned a fairy godmother granting women entrepreneurs access to capital effortlessly. She dreamt of a program where, with the meeting of certain metrics, women could secure substantial funding within hours, sparing them the tedious application processes and allowing them to focus on their businesses and families.

Erin's vision expanded further as she pondered the question, "What can we be doing to help women entrepreneurs access capital?" She emphasized the importance of connecting women with the right venture capitalists or angels. Erin acknowledged the predominant male presence in these funding realms, highlighting the challenge of getting them to understand the unique problems and solutions women's businesses offered.

Living in Thunder Bay added another layer to this challenge. The absence of local venture capitalists and angels meant a journey to major hubs like Toronto, Vancouver, or Silicon Valley. For Erin, this entailed not only taking time away from her business but also her family. Responsibilities didn't end at the workday's close. The upfront expenses of travel, coupled with the time required to create and perfect a pitch, made applying for funding a difficult choice, considering the associated risks and sacrifices.

Erin's journey serves as a beacon of inspiration, a testament to the resilience and strength of women entrepreneurs, challenging stereotypes, and rewriting the narrative for generations to come.

Abby Sherlock - Aspect Ontario

Meet Abby Sherlock, the creative force behind Aspect Ontario, a vibrant full-service marketing business nestled in the heart of Thunder Bay. As the driving mind behind marketing, graphics, photography, and videography for local small businesses, Abby's journey is as inspiring as the colorful content she crafts.

In 2021, Abby embarked on her entrepreneurial adventure, fueled by her passion for graphic design and an unwavering love for capturing moments through the lens. The catalyst for her business journey was the Summer Company program from the CEDC, which provided not just funding but also a crucial dose of mentorship and guidance. With a vision and the necessary capital, Abby invested in top-notch software programs and equipment to turn her dreams into a visual reality.

Thunder Bay, with its tight-knit and collaborative business community, became the perfect canvas for Abby's entrepreneurial aspirations. In her eyes, the interconnectedness of local businesses offered a unique advantage, fostering a spirit of cooperation that propelled her venture forward.

Reflecting on the challenges faced by women entrepreneurs in accessing capital, Abby emphasizes the need for increased public awareness about available funding sources. She suggests that programs tailored for women should streamline their application processes, reducing unnecessary requirements that may hinder access. Abby's insights shed light on the importance of making funding avenues more accessible, ensuring that aspiring women entrepreneurs can navigate the financial landscape with confidence.

As Abby delves into the dynamics of mentorship, she values collaboration but stresses the potential drawbacks of repetitive workshops and administrative tasks. For her, the true essence lies in efficient mentorship that adds value without becoming a roadblock to business growth.

One of the surprising revelations in Abby's entrepreneurial journey was the transformative power of the initial \$5,000 from the Summer Company program. This modest sum, once invested in basic equipment,



became the springboard for her business expansion. Abby, a young woman entrepreneur without substantial assets, found this initial funding crucial in overcoming the typical barriers to financial support.

Looking ahead, Abby envisions the possibility of scaling her business and entering new markets with additional funding. Recognizing the potential for growth, she sees the acquisition of advanced equipment as a strategic move to enhance the quality of her services and elevate customer satisfaction.

Abby Sherlock's story is a testament to the impact of targeted funding programs, mentorship, and the indomitable spirit of women entrepreneurs. Through Aspect Ontario, she continues to paint a vibrant picture of success, one creative stroke at a time, in the flourishing entrepreneurial landscape of Thunder Bay.



Nadine Kelly - Breakfast Lunch and Deener

Nadine Kelly's journey into founding her company "Breakfast, Lunch and Deener" began in early 2016, sparked by a simple yet profound realization: the lack of healthy, convenient food options for the community. Driven by her passion for nutrition and wellness, Nadine embarked on a mission to fill this gap, igniting a spark that would soon evolve into a thriving culinary enterprise.

In the early stages of her entrepreneurial endeavor, Nadine faced the daunting task of starting and funding her business with minimal resources. Armed with nothing but a meager initial investment of \$350, she embarked on a journey of self-reliance and resourcefulness, bootstrapping every aspect of her venture. From securing necessary licenses and even building her own website, Nadine embraced the challenges with unwavering resolve, teaching herself the essential skills needed to bring her vision to life.

In the bustling kitchen of a rented commercial space, Nadine's dream began to take shape. For the first three years, she poured her heart and soul into her business, reinvesting every penny of profit back into its growth. With each passing day, her culinary creations gained popularity, drawing in patrons eager for wholesome meals made with love and care. However, as demand soared, Nadine recognized the need for expansion and greater autonomy. Determined to take her business to new heights, she set her sights on establishing her own facility.

The transition from rented space to her own facility marked a pivotal moment in Nadine's entrepreneurial journey. It was a time of both excitement and trepidation as she navigated the complexities of securing funding and managing investments. Through partnerships with organizations like the Innovation Center and strategic project-based funding, Nadine was able to realize her dream of owning her own culinary domain. Yet, the road to success was not without its challenges.

In a close-knit community like Thunder Bay, where everyone knows everyone, Nadine discovered both

advantages and disadvantages. While the strong sense of community fostered support and camaraderie, it also posed obstacles for those new to the city, like herself. As an outsider, Nadine had to work twice as hard to establish herself within the tight-knit network of local businesses. However, through perseverance and a commitment to integration, she gradually earned the trust and respect of her peers, solidifying her place within the community.

As a woman entrepreneur, Nadine faced additional hurdles in accessing capital. Despite these challenges, she remained undeterred, leveraging her network and advocating for greater support for women-founded companies. Through her own experiences, Nadine recognized the power of meaningful connections and the importance of organizations facilitating introductions and fostering collaboration among entrepreneurs.

Today, as Nadine reflects on her entrepreneurial journey, she does so with a sense of pride and accomplishment. From humble beginnings to owning her own commercial kitchen, she has overcome countless obstacles to build a thriving business that serves as a beacon of health and wellness in her community. As she looks to the future, Nadine remains committed to her vision, embracing the unknown with optimism and resilience. With each new day, she continues to write the next chapter of her entrepreneurial story, inspiring others to pursue their dreams with passion and determination.

Brook Dallaire - Sociable

Brook Dallaire's journey into entrepreneurship was a blend of ambition, resourcefulness, and the occasional surprise. As the owner of Sociable, a marketing and events company for small businesses, she embarked on a path that was both rewarding and challenging.

Her journey began with a pivotal moment—the opportunity provided by the Starter Company Plus Program. This program, facilitated by the CEDC, offered Brook a lifeline in the form of a \$5000 grant. With this financial boost, she could acquire the necessary equipment to kickstart her business. It wasn't just about buying gear; it was about overcoming the common hurdle of equipment costs that many entrepreneurs face. Brook recognized the program's significance in providing a vital stepping stone that propelled her business forward.

Brook's entrepreneurial journey in Thunder Bay stood in stark contrast to her experience in larger cities like Minneapolis. She acknowledged the advantages of the tight-knit community in Thunder Bay, where word-of-mouth referrals flourished, a phenomenon she believed wouldn't be as potent in a big city. However, she also recognized the challenges inherent in scaling a business in a smaller town, particularly the scarcity and rising costs of commercial space. This contrast underscored the nuanced dynamics of entrepreneurship in different settings, highlighting the importance of community support while navigating unique challenges.

Reflecting on the broader landscape for women entrepreneurs, Brook highlighted the disparities in accessing capital. She noted the lack of representation in funding decision-making processes, emphasizing the importance of balanced and unbiased boards. Her insights underscored the need for awareness and targeted outreach to ensure that women entrepreneurs had equitable access to resources and support.

Delving deeper into the landscape of women-founded companies, Brook highlighted the need for increased awareness and targeted outreach. Funding organizations and government programs, she suggested, could play a pivotal role in collaboration and promotion within



women entrepreneur networks in Thunder Bay. The goal was to better provide information about available resources, fostering a supportive environment where women could easily access the funding necessary to bring their business visions to life.

Brook found herself continually surprised by the realities of entrepreneurship. The steep costs of equipment and the necessity of wearing multiple hats were eye-openers. From mastering accounting software to balancing work and family life, she embraced the multifaceted nature of running a business.

Through her journey, Brook epitomized the resilience and adaptability required of entrepreneurs. Her story served as inspiration, not just for aspiring business owners but for anyone facing challenges on their path to success.

Roundtable 1 - Breaking Funding Barriers

Exploring the Systemic Challenges Hindering Women's Access to Funding

In a lively roundtable discussion on breaking funding barriers for women entrepreneurs, stories of challenges and triumphs unfolded, shedding light on the systemic issues faced by women seeking financial support for their businesses.

A business owner faced limitations due to modest assets when applying for loans, compounded by a dismissive comment from a banker. Another participant highlighted geographical challenges for women in the north, emphasizing the significant barriers posed by the requirement for in-person meetings in larger cities, particularly for those in remote northern communities.

An entrepreneur, in securing a grant, recounted facing a discriminatory interview question about potential frivolous spending. The experience left her feeling insulted, ultimately receiving only half of the requested grant amount. Another entrepreneur encountered difficulties in identifying suitable grants, trapped in a Catch-22 where funding was needed to meet income criteria, creating a financial loop.

Addressing the career gap for raising children, a participant highlighted the misunderstanding by banks, emphasizing the challenges posed by the predominantly male composition of funding organizations. Stories were shared of grant rejections due to perceived early-stage business status, encountering intimidating all-male pitch environments, and frustrations with opaque grant



program guidelines.

Lengthy processes and discriminatory questions from predominantly male investing programs were noted as challenges by another participant.

About ten years ago, changes in NOHFC's eligibility requirements excluded retail and service-based businesses, which are predominantly run by women. This not only holds back individual women

entrepreneurs, but also slows down the progress of local businesses that are important for community well-being.

The discussion emphasized the need for funding programs to be more inclusive and understand the specific challenges faced by women running product or service-oriented businesses.

As the narratives unfolded, it became evident that many women entrepreneurs face initial denials until their success becomes apparent, underlining the need for a more inclusive and understanding funding landscape. The collective call was for a shift in the conversation, breaking down barriers, and empowering women entrepreneurs to build thriving local businesses essential for a robust economy.



Roundtable 2 - Pitch Perfect

Overcoming Gender Bias in Funding Pitches

In our second session of roundtable discussions in partnership with NACO, we delved into the crucial issue of overcoming funding barriers, spotlighting the challenges and biases encountered when seeking financial support. The conversation kicked off by addressing a sobering statistic: despite women owning 17.5% of private sector businesses globally, they received a mere 2.3% of venture capital funding in 2020, as reported by Crunchbase in May 2023.

The conversation delved into the nuances of gender bias encountered during funding pitches. It was noted that male judges often pose different questions to female entrepreneurs, often veering into personal territories such as family situations and marital status. One participant shared her experience of being asked by a funder if she had a husband, coupled with condescending remarks implying that a woman couldn't run a business alone.

The disparity in funding amounts was highlighted, with women frequently receiving lower sums due to unfounded assumptions about their commitment and expertise. Moreover, the stringent time commitments of funding programs often outweigh the benefits, hindering entrepreneurial growth.

Participants recounted the stressful nature of funding pitches, exacerbated by investors' tendency to keep cameras off and pose inappropriate questions. Standing up against such behavior was seen as a delicate balancing act, with women risking being labeled as overly aggressive.

However, participants explored a strategic approach to handling inappropriate questions during funding pitches, emphasizing the importance of redirecting such inquiries to discern the underlying motives and information sought by the investors. This approach was seen as a proactive way to reclaim control of the narrative and steer the conversation toward



relevant aspects of the business.

The concept revolved around understanding the needs and expectations of the audience, recognizing that investors may have specific concerns or interests driving their questions. By reframing inappropriate inquiries and seeking clarification on the information sought, entrepreneurs could gain valuable insights into the investors' priorities and tailor their responses accordingly.

The importance of women supporting each other to overcome these challenges was highlighted. Strategies discussed included building confidence through mentorship and practice. It was noted that women often struggle with perfectionism, unlike the more self-assured approach commonly seen in men.

A call to action resonated throughout the discussion, urging women to actively participate in pitch competitions and challenge the status quo. Awareness of audience needs, powerful presentations, and confidence were highlighted as crucial elements in successful pitches.

Ultimately, the roundtable concluded with a collective resolve to dismantle funding barriers and inspire future generations of women entrepreneurs, recognizing that change requires both individual empowerment and systemic shifts in perception and support.

Roundtable 3 - Rising Above

Women Entrepreneurs Defying Entrepreneurial Barriers

During the third session in our series of Women Entrepreneur's Roundtables in Partnership with NACO, a group of women entrepreneurs engaged in candid discussions about the challenges they encounter in the business world and how they rose above them with resilience and determination.

Fear of failure was a significant obstacle mentioned. Despite their ambitions, some women admitted to grappling with self-doubt, which sometimes hindered their willingness to take risks and explore new opportunities. Some participants shared that failure in business is a scary thought for several reasons including the worry that they will let people down, be judged, and have more difficulty getting back into the workforce if their entrepreneurial project is unsuccessful.

The importance of having a solid support system was emphasized. Whether it's through mentorship, networking, or supportive peers, having a community to lean on can make a world of difference in overcoming challenges and seizing opportunities.

The discussion also touched upon the disparities in entrepreneurial education and encouragement between genders. Women often find themselves at a disadvantage, lacking the same level of preparation and encouragement as their male counterparts.

Breaking into male-dominated industries was cited as a formidable challenge. Women spoke of facing biases and stereotypes that questioned their qualifications and capabilities, despite their proven track records and expertise.

A mindset shift was proposed as a crucial step in overcoming barriers. Rather than dwelling on obstacles, women were encouraged to focus on their strengths and the possibilities that lie ahead, adopting a proactive and solution-oriented approach.

The reluctance to embrace the title of "entrepreneur" due to perceived inadequacies or unconventional business structures was also discussed. Women were urged to own their achievements and redefine what it means to be an entrepreneur on their own terms.

Navigating the complex landscape of funding was identified as a significant hurdle. Many women

expressed frustration at the lack of accessible resources and support for female-dominated industries, calling for greater recognition and investment in their ventures. Government support for traditional women-owned businesses was deemed insufficient, with calls for more targeted initiatives and funding opportunities to level the playing field and promote economic empowerment.

The role of family dynamics in entrepreneurship was also explored, with some women acknowledging the disproportionate burden of responsibility placed on them, despite their equal contributions to business success.

Challenges specific to regional contexts, such as those faced by women in Northern Ontario, were highlighted. Despite the unique obstacles they encounter, women in these areas are praised for their resilience and grit in overcoming adversity.

Overcoming feelings of guilt and imposter syndrome was identified as an ongoing struggle for many women. Despite their achievements, some still grapple with doubts and insecurities, highlighting the need for ongoing support and validation.

Amidst the dialogue on entrepreneurial challenges, the conversation veered towards the profound influence women in business can have on their children. One participant shared a story about her mother, who had been an entrepreneur since her childhood. Witnessing her mother break through barriers and pursue her dreams inspired her to embark on her own entrepreneurial journey. This personal story resonated deeply with the group, highlighting the powerful impact of parental role models. It underscored the importance of women recognizing the positive influence they have on their children by demonstrating resilience, ambition, and dedication in their business pursuits. Through their actions, women entrepreneurs not only shape their own futures but also inspire the next generation to dream big and pursue their passions fearlessly.

Roundtable 4 - Overcoming Hurdles

Exploring the Challenges Women Face in Business Expansion

During the last session in our series of roundtable discussion among women entrepreneurs, the atmosphere was charged with shared experiences and candid reflections on the hurdles faced in expanding their businesses. Each woman brought forth stories that echoed a common sentiment: the journey to growth is often strewn with obstacles, many of which are unique to their gender.

One indigenous woman spoke up about the challenges of navigating stereotypes in her industry. She recounted instances where she felt pressured to conform to certain expectations, both in her appearance and in the branding of her business. Such encounters weren't isolated; she shared unsettling experiences of racism from advisors and consultants. Her story resonated deeply, illustrating the pervasive nature of bias in business.

Another prevalent theme was the struggle to forge professional connections. While men seemed to effortlessly form networks akin to a "boys club," women found themselves on the outskirts, striving to break into these circles. The lack of support from both peers and governmental initiatives left many feeling overlooked and undervalued.

Funding emerged as a critical barrier to growth. Despite their tenacity, many women found themselves at a disadvantage when seeking financial backing. The arduous process often led to disillusionment, stalling the scaling of their ventures. Compounded with familial responsibilities, the juggle between work and home life became an added impediment.

However, amidst the challenges, a glimmer of hope emerged through the solidarity of women supporting one another. Collaboration was touted as a powerful tool for overcoming adversity and driving economic growth. Participants stressed the importance of celebrating successes and acknowledging each other's value in a competitive



landscape. Yet, not all interactions among women were supportive. Some recounted instances of sabotage and rivalry, underscoring the complexity of female dynamics in business. It became evident that while collaboration was paramount, self-assurance and assertiveness were equally vital traits for navigating the entrepreneurial landscape.

As the discussion drew to a close, a resounding call for change reverberated throughout the room. Women urged for greater access to capital, enhanced business support, and a shift in societal attitudes towards female entrepreneurship. They recognized the need to redefine success, embracing imperfection and valuing diversity in the pursuit of growth.

In the end, the roundtable served as both a platform for shared experiences and a catalyst for collective action. It was a reminder that while the path forward may be daunting, the strength derived from unity and self-belief can pave the way for a brighter, more inclusive future in business.