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LOCAL

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Ford eyes First Parliament site **2**
Donald Higney

Bad billionaires **4**
Ben Bull

CSI Regent Park wants you! **7**
Denise Soueidan-O'Leary

Women Speak Out, a leadership program

Rana Khan

In 2014, I was fortunate enough to participate in Women Speak Out, a leadership program offered by Working for Change (workingforchange.ca). This charitable organization, one of the earliest to champion social enterprises, provides education and employment opportunities for people disadvantaged by systemic barriers.

On January 15, 2021, I listened to the stories of 11 amazing women as they graduated from the same WSO program – but this time I was involved in delivering it. What a privilege it was to be connected, along with program manager Lubna Khalid, with women who felt empowered in the same way I had felt six years ago.

From its inception in 2011, the Women Speak Out program had as its lead facilitator the late Pat Capponi. Until her death last April, Pat had relentlessly advocated for the rights of marginalized people, especially those with mental health challenges. Pat and Lubna envisioned a program offering holistic training in leadership, including political advocacy and community engagement, plus gender-specific workshops on violence against women, and on women's legal rights, housing and health issues.

Women Speak Out participants, ranging in age from 23 to 69, have come from diverse backgrounds. Some have experienced years of poverty and homelessness, domestic violence, mental health challenges and/or addiction. Others are refugees or newcomers to Canada from various parts of the world.

This rich diversity allows the women to learn from one another and to form bonds across generational, ethnic, class and racial divides. Sharing experiences has been among the most valuable aspects of the program, as understanding the struggles of other women encourages participants to speak out on their common issues.

As members of Working for Change's speakers' bureau, WSO graduates are available to speak from a woman's perspective on poverty, mental health, newcomer integration and immigration, domestic violence and other topics involving marginalized communities.

In 2017 I embarked upon another rewarding association, this time with the Toronto Writers Collective (torontowriterscollective.ca), an organization that has brought joy and empowerment to many through free writing workshops. Since the pandemic began, the TWC writing workshops, like the Women Speak Out program,

have been held online.

Women Speak Out graduates this year include Christina Walsh, who's long been +++associated with Toronto Writers Collective, and Kate Yee and Ambreen Malik, two writers I introduced to TWC in my role as a volunteer creative writing facilitator.

I believe writing can be both therapeutic and inspiring. I'm sure that these future authors, along the other Women Speak Out graduates, will continue to engage with the community and provide leadership in their chosen careers.



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