

OPINION

WOMEN & LEADERSHIP

Women should be out front speaking, not just in backrooms organizing

Ottawa's Famous 5 Foundation believes that mentorship can be one of the most valuable tools to meet these challenges.



BY CARLENE VARIYAN

OTTAWA—At a ceremony at Rideau Hall on Oct. 18, Gov.-Gen. David Johnston presented five Canadian women with the Governor General's Award in Commemoration of the Persons Case. It was the the 83rd anniversary of the

Persons Case decision, a landmark moment in the history of women's rights in Canada.

There is a certain ubiquity to commemoration days and awareness months, which makes it all the more remarkable that the Persons Case retains a real significance eight decades later. Indeed, there is something special about Persons Day.

Canadian women are no longer fighting for basic inalienable rights like the vote, the right to own property, or the right to work. Instead, our challenges are of a more intangible nature. We struggle to empower

one another, to dissolve gender-normative world views, and to crack that enduring glass ceiling.

Ottawa's Famous 5 Foundation believes that mentorship can be one of the most valuable tools to meet these challenges. The group spearheads mentorship opportunities for girls and young women in the Ottawa area. Among their initiatives is the Norton Rose Award, presented to a young professional woman nominated and selected by Famous 5's executive. Coinciding with Persons Day and the Governor General's Awards, this award offers the recipient mentorship and development opportunities that she might not otherwise have at this stage of her career, such as public speaking, boardroom negotiations, and media exposure. The principle behind the program, as described by Famous 5 chair Isabel Metcalfe, is that women should be at the front of the room speaking, not at the back of the room organizing.

I was honoured to be chosen for Norton Rose's award this year. The program has been a whirlwind. I worked with a film crew to conduct interviews with the Persons Case award recipients, took part in the Governor General's ceremony at Rideau Hall, and on Oct. 19, addressed a few hundred people gathered at the National Arts Centre

for Famous 5's annual luncheon panel honouring those five tremendous women. The mentoring works in both directions: over the course of the next year, I'll work with the Famous 5 Foundation to mentor young girls in at-risk communities around Ottawa.

It must be said: the very fact that Norton Rose's endeavours are considered achievements shows how much work we have left to do when it comes to the status of women in Canada. The achievement gap between men and women isn't going anywhere anytime soon. But when we mentor young women, we cultivate their ambition and self-confidence, allowing them to rise to the challenges they face in their careers and in life. They are the best chance we have of closing that gap one day.

U.S. Senator Barbara Buono once said that behind every great woman is another woman who took the time to care. Mentorship renews itself at each reprise: I know that the successes I've seen in my life and career thus far are owed to the strong and inspiring women who took the time to encourage me. I'll be showing my thanks by paying it forward.

Carlene Variyan is the Famous Five Foundation's Norton Rose Mentorship nominee.

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