Celebrating 20 Years of Women's Resilience

WOMEN'S HEALTH IN WOMEN'S HANDS
COMMUNITY HEALTH CENTRE
INCREASE • INNOVATE • IGNITE
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Resilience (rĭ-zĭl’yŏns). n. The positive capacity of a woman to thrive despite adversity

This year marks the 20th anniversary of Women’s Health in Women’s Hands Community Health Centre and we feel that it has been a privilege to provide exemplary primary healthcare and to serve some of the most resilient women and communities in the province. In honour of the many women we have cared for, worked with and been mentored by over the past 20 years, we have selected 20 who we feel exemplify what it truly means to be resilient.

These remarkable women have been chosen by a joint committee of WHIWH staff and board members because each one has taught us what it means to find strength no matter what is happening in your life and in your world. These phenomenal women have taught us how to live life more fully by surviving change, disappointments and even tragedy. These women come from diverse backgrounds, experiences and walks of life but all share the common values of optimism, joyful spirits and the strong belief in giving back to their communities and WHIWH has definitely benefited.

Our chosen women of resilience represent the many women who have come together over our 20 year history to make Women’s Health in Women’s Hands what it is today. Please join us in celebrating their lives. We honour the work that they have done and the work that they will continue to do often without compensation or recognition. We also celebrate the lives of the many more resilient women who will come forward and join WHIWH as we continue to advocate for increased access to healthcare for all women over the next 20 years simply because our lives are important, our lives have meaning and every woman matters.

Notisha Massaquoi
Executive Director
Nurse, educator, advocate, mentor, and recognized leader, Joan Lesmond had a profound and widespread impact on the nursing profession and on community-based healthcare in Canada and beyond. After immigrating to Canada in 1970 from St. Lucia, Joan worked with perseverance and passion in building her chosen career, earning a Bachelor of Science degree in Nursing, a Masters in Community Health and a Doctorate in Health Policy and Health Education with a focus on cultural competency in marginalized communities.

A dynamic and respected leader, Joan was Executive Director of Community Engagement and Executive Director, Foundation, at Saint Elizabeth Health Care, where she successfully forged community partnerships and engagement in the areas of service delivery, international consulting and chronic disease self-management program.

Joan established a reputation for welcoming new challenges as she strengthened and role-modeled diversity within the nursing profession. Three years ago Dr. Lesmond was the only Black woman to be recognized with a Canadian Nursing Association Centennial Award honouring Canada’s Top 100 registered nurses. Always a strong advocate for nurses, she

Joan Lesmond
“So stick to the fight when you’re hardest hit,
It’s when things seem worst that you must not quit.”
-Anonymous

1952-2011
took on leadership responsibilities and board roles including the Canadian Nurses Association, the Registered Nurses Association of Ontario where she was the president for two years and the Canadian Nurses Protective Society.

For close to 15 years she was enthusiastically involved in the education and mentorship of countless nursing students at Ryerson University. At the same time, she worked passionately to advance community health nursing and care for people with HIV/AIDS and through international engagement as a delegate in the OHA Africa Lesotho Initiative – For Hope, Health and Healing.

Joan championed the rights of girls and women of diverse backgrounds at all levels of the health care system. She supported African and Caribbean women affected by the HIV epidemic and, after volunteering in South Africa with women and girls living with HIV/AIDS, she became active in policy development and for the South African Network of Nurses and Midwives.

As chair of the Ontario Caregiver Coalition, she challenged the disproportionate burden of care on women and as president of the Association of Ontario Health Centres, she ensured the examination of the social determinants of health and promoted the importance of anti-oppression frameworks.

A past president of Regent Park Community Health Centre she was a forceful advocate for the country’s health care system and of the need for it to remain publicly funded. Dr. Lesmond was also a director of Women’s College Hospital, a board member of Health Force Ontario, a director of the Hospital Association of Ontario and a founding board member of Hospice Palliative Care Ontario (HPCO).

Women’s Health in Women’s Hands is proud to have had the opportunity to be mentored by Joan. She provided guidance to our Executive Director, Senior Management team and our board. We have been supported by one of the most brilliant leaders in our sector. We only hope to live up to her legacy.
I work with the Ministry of Community of Social Service but I am still working in my field which is health. Most of my work is in dealing with vulnerable people. I have previously collaborated with WHIWH when I was a community health worker at Rexdale Community Health Centre to organize and deliver a forum on Female Genital Mutilation. I am the founder and president of the Etobicoke Conflict Mediation Team. I was recently a Board Member of Rexdale Community Health Centre but I resigned from the board in 2010 to run for city council in the Toronto municipal election.

When I came to Canada back in 1991, I began working with the Canadian Red Cross dealing with issues of immigration, famine and the civil wars in Somalia, Liberia and Rwanda. 1991 was very horrible year for so many people. I have also worked with the United Way and raised funds for them. I have offered my services as a resource person with several organizations including Humber River Regional Hospital and Rexdale Community Legal Clinic.

I know that I can help those in need. I was very privileged to have received an excellent education and I have a deep inner desire to be there for people who need me. As a new immigrant who arrived in the early 90’s, I know the transition can be very difficult for some and that is why I choose to help newcomers so that they can learn about the system and they can integrate into Canadian society more smoothly. In 1993, after two years in this country, my volunteer work was featured in an article in the Toronto Star, and I realized I could be an example for others. Canada gave us an opportunity and that is what moved me. After I ran for political office, the gentleman, my son’s school principal who had helped me navigate child care so many years before called me to say how proud he was of me.

When I came to Canada, I didn’t fall into depression when I learned I could not work as a doctor. Instead, I thought I can reinvent myself, learn the system, and at the age of 40 I decided I was going to go back to university. I spent thousands of dollars, writing the exams, and it didn’t work out, but I still bounced back. I was able to reinvent myself, participate in volunteering in a lot of organizations and get good jobs where I can use my skills.
I could never count the resilient women that most admire however, I chose three who are very important to me

My mother was an immigrant woman. She was educated in cultural things and religious things but she didn’t have literacy. She moved to the city where she married my father and has raised eight successful children - 6 girls and 2 boys. She always came to the school to talk to the teachers; she always helped us to understand that we have to study hard. My father was studying medicine. She always understood that we were still lacking, she knew when we were not prepared even though she did not know how to read. She made it clear that we have to study hard. When Somali became a written language, my mom learned how to read and write and she was over 40. She also learned Arabic. She moved to Canada in 1990 and she studied the Koran. She is in her 80's and she reads better than I do and every day, at the age of 84, she still wants to learn more. I believe my mom has resilience. Even though she wasn’t formally educated, she works very hard, she was involved with women’s organizations and she travelled a lot

The second woman I truly admire is a Somali doctor who graduated from university in Russia. There was a lot of turmoil in Somalia while she was working in the hospital in a position of responsibility. A lot of people were killed during that dark period and she refused to work under the terms those in power wanted her to work under. She was able to say no I am not going to work under these terms and when the world learned about her courageous work, Glamour Magazine gave her an award last year.

I admire all the women who are running from civil wars and famine with their children - in Kenya, in Haiti, in Ethiopia, women are still dealing with devastating issues. And protecting their children – they are all truly resilient women.

If you know what is happening in the world, and see the injustice, how can you not be inspired to continue to try to make a difference? I remember watching TV during the famine in Somalia and seeing women were dying in the streets with their children still attached to the breast; those that survived were selling everything to feed their children. Imagine those women coming all the way from Africa to this country? They must have a lot of survival skills. They are all single mothers starting over and now they are driving cars and navigating the system. They are always there for their children; they don’t even care about themselves. These women deserve more than anyone else to be recognized.

When you are not a famous or rich person, or not a person recognized by the main stream, it is very difficult to get funding for programs, but I believe we know best what we need in our community. Too often there is no one doing anything to help. Like everyone we hope our children will be the future for this country.

My dream is to build a hope centre for the children in the inner city, so they can feel the support and receive the things they need. That is the kind of help I want to create.
I am a lawyer, trainer and mediator. For 20 years, I have been involved with immigration and refugee law, human rights, and criminal restorative justice (community based peace making circles, sentencing circles).

I am inspired to do this work by a life of inequality, I have seen inequality since my first conscience memory at the age of 4 - seeing the way the men treated the women in their lives and knowing it was wrong, being beaten up in school and being seriously bullied - self esteem issues. I have had to work a very long time to accept myself, but I realized this is not right, and people do not deserve to be to treated that way.

For me, resilience is exemplified by my clients. I have many clients that I have worked very closely with and the way I lawyer is very much entrenched in social work. One client who came into the office was meek and shy and would not drive a car. She had such low self esteem and blamed herself for everything, and she thought she was worthless. I worked with her on a gender based refugee claim since there was domestic violence. I referred her into therapy, and other supports and a year later, she was driving a car, she was working, she was being assertive. When she began she could barely speak to me, and at the end at her hearing, she was assertive. She had charmed, the adjudicator who was so convinced by her story he gave her a positive recommendation and she was able to stay in the country. The pride I felt from what she had accomplished was indescribable and it was a true moment of resilience.

Some women of resilience that I admire are Suzette Mafuna. Suzette was a journalist in apartheid South Africa. She went through the horrors of that and had an abusive husband. Now she is in Toronto living this gorgeous life, where she is helpful, and strong, and an elder with so much wisdom.

I admire my mother, who has also been through the worst of it, but at the end of the day got up every morning got up and went to work and raised her children, and provided a
home and food. And I admire Harriet Tubman - what could she have been thinking? Ain’t I a women, show nuff. These women in the harshest circumstances have stood up for justice. My skin tingles when I think of women like that.

I just think it’s my calling, to tell the truth about the worst conditions on our planet, to speak where there is silencing and denial, I am a survivor of sexual abuse and the constant denial is still the reality of gender abuse, and atrocious things continue to happen on a daily basis. Women who are raped, a father who wants to kill his daughter because she wants to wear western clothes. Her father raped her, and now he is molesting the boys, and the mother is defending him. I have always felt a certain fearlessness around that, and I know it is the truth. Although there is denial, I know that it is the truth. I feel driven, I feel called and unable to be silent.

The most important resource I have been able to develop is to surround myself with people who are also truth seekers, people who won’t make me feel crazy, or deny what’s happening, who will help me to continue to fight, and I will do that as well. People with whom I have solidarity.

Ultimately my ideal is a violence free world. In terms of my contributions to that, on a micro level I hope to support individual women access liberated lives. On a less micro level I hope to bring an understanding of inequality into communities. On the macro level I hope to breathe truth into the cracks where there is just a lot of cover up.
I have been volunteering with Women’s Health In Women’s Hands CHC for over 3 years now as a peer support worker.

I felt like I should give back to the community, so that maybe people can learn and understand what HIV is all about. I only found out I was HIV positive since coming to Canada. I recall when I came here and when they called me and told me I was HIV positive, I could not take it. It was too much for me. I tried to be strong, I fought with it and even thought about suicide, but then I told myself NO. This is not who I am. I had to be strong and fight back. So I joined the HIV positive group at WHIWH in 2005 where I met other ladies and saw that I was not the only one. I said to myself, if all these women can live and survive, then so can I.

My mother was someone in my life that I thought was very strong. She died when I was a teenager but she taught me about being strong. The women from the Skills Development group inspire me and make me think I should be strong like them, think like them and act like them and be able to live a happy life, despite living with HIV. The group provides a space for us to share and come to a place that was like a “comfort zone” where you felt like you were home, and get comfort and support.

Whenever I have something really pushing me, I think of this song “I Hope you Dance”, that I find very inspiring. I also think of all the other women that have gone through many more things in life, and have the strength to go on. I believe that “when one door closes, God opens another door”. God will never leave you empty handed. When I think about if I will die soon because I have HIV, I remember that I have kids to take care of, I have a job, I have my family, I have life and hope, I have to help the other woman, I have the support of other people, so I cannot lock myself away and stay in my house because I have HIV.

I hope that we all fight to break down the stigma around HIV because that is what is killing us. Some persons always think about what he or she will think of me if I disclose, or others sometimes even stigmatize themselves. I wish for a day when we can all speak openly about our
HIV. When I can say to a friend that I am going to the doctor to get more HIV medication, or today I feel like this HIV is killing me but I am going to keep fighting it. To continue to be able to talk openly about my HIV status with people gives us a chance to move on and gather strength from each other.

I hope to help more people see that HIV is just like all the others chronic diseases. That people can live with this for many years and have a full life.
I am a Spanish-speaking Clinical Counselor at the Women’s Health Centre, St. Joseph Health Centre.

For the past twenty years I have been working with the Spanish-speaking community at large, providing individual and group counseling and support to immigrant and refugee women who have suffered traumatic experiences during childhood and/or adult life (i.e. physical, emotional, verbal and/or sexual abuse, depression, anxiety, mood adjustments, post-partum depression, relationships and family issues). In addition, I have worked to support women in dealing with their process of being diagnosed HIV+ and experiencing discrimination and stigmatization.

Early in life, I discovered my sense of compassion which I slowly learned how to use for myself during difficult times, and then I started to use it in my surrounding world towards others. In my teen years, I wanted to be a medical doctor to cure the body but circumstances guided me to formal training and education in the field of psychology - learning how to support others emotionally, which I will continue do in this part of the world or another.

Resilience is exemplified for me through my own adaptation process as new immigrant, and active member in the Canadian society, as a person, as a family member and professionally. Appreciating my present, accepting my past and being purposeful in achieving my goals.

I admire Helen Keller, the well-known deaf and blind woman who overcame everything in spite of two fundamental obstacles to normal life. And her famous words: “Blindness keeps people away from things. Deafness keeps people away from people.”

I am inspired to continue by my love and passion for the work I do, which energizes and motivates me greatly and by my clients: women who are active fighters in their coping process of re-shaping and responding to their emotional needs and challenges in life.
At my work place, I feel really grateful in working with a bunch of great women who daily inspire and support each other in good and in difficult times, both as workers and as human beings sharing the same vision of be compassionate listeners, empowering and helping women to break down their isolation while they are dealing with difficult situations in their lives.

I hope to continue opening doors, spaces and opportunities for women to transform their lives.
I am a physician. I am involved with various organizations and am currently actively involved in People to People Aid Organization Canada, and the Ethiopian North American Health Professionals Association in Canada. I have been doing this work for the past 30 years.

I was inspired by a drive to do my part in combating poverty and disease that I saw in many communities across the world and my surroundings.

I do not have one particular story or resilience, really but the struggle of the women in refugee camps that I served 30 or more years ago is still fresh in my mind. The abuse that they faced; their struggles to bounce back and make life normal again; their successes (and also their failures) – their collective stories that are still fresh in my mind is what exemplifies resilience to me.

Resilient women that I admire are my mother, with her iron will and perseverance and Hagere, a refugee woman in a Sudanese refugee camp. Her story is too long and complicated to talk about in a sentence or two but these are the two women that my deep admiration is extended to.

The success and the difference that our projects bring to the community is my primary inspiration.

Our visions can come true if many of us can only believe that our little contributions will make a difference. When people understand that small, grass roots organizations have a better success rate in running efficient and useful projects, then they will contribute more to these life changing projects.

I hope that my contributions will empower people and make a life-long change in the way communities and people resolve their issues.

Dr. Haregua Getu

“Our visions can come true if many of us can only believe that our little contributions will make a difference.”
As a child in a small rural village in Sierra Leone, Mariatu Kamara lived peacefully surrounded by family and friends. Rumors of rebel attacks were no more than a distant worry. But when 12-year-old Mariatu set out for a neighboring village, she never arrived. Heavily armed rebel soldiers, many no older than children themselves, attacked and tortured Mariatu. During this brutal act of senseless violence they cut off both her hands. In 2002 with no parents or living adult to support her and living in a refugee camp Mariatu made the decision to come to Canada. At 16, she attended school for the first time and by 2008 Mariatu had published her first book, the memoir “The Bite of the Mango” which is an international bestseller and winner of almost 15 literary awards.

Now in her early 20’s Mariatu is attending George College. She has been named a UNICEF Special Representative for Children in Armed Conflict; a Voices of Courage Honoree by the Women’s Commission for Refugee Women and Children and has established The Mariatu Foundation.

The Mariatu Foundation seeks to provide a much needed refuge for women and children. Through the opening of a home and eventually homes in Sierra Leone, the Mariatu Foundation offers healing programs and assistance in the resettlement and reintegration of abused women and children into loving and supportive communities.

A documentary about child victims of war, featuring Mariatu, is in the works. Mariatu has recently returned to Sierra Leone where she has purchased land and broken ground on her foundation headquarters.
MataDanZe is currently made up of six members Misset Parata, Corrie Sakaluk, Victoria Mata, Gricel Severino, Irma Villafuerte and Olivia Davies who have been dancing with the group between 2 and 5 years.

We dance to show injustice, pain, sorrow, happiness; growing, fear, searching, empowerment, love, hope and life. We are inspired by the experience of being healed by dance, and seeing the courage and the power of the artistic pieces that we have created. We feel the need to bring to stages and the streets history from a gender perspective, highlighting the impact of women in history, as well as the impact of history on women and we feel the need for changes in our social political environment. Our families’ histories of loss and oppression and having seen the pain caused by injustice and war inspire us. Social justice and human rights are our passion. Working with diverse communities and women is satisfying, because the work that is created and accomplished is massive and inspiring. We dance to heal and be healed by the expression of story-telling through movement.

We express our resilience and explore resistance through dance when we are challenged about our sexual identities, when we experience and survive family conflict and estrangement and when we overcome conflict and reconnect with our families by putting aside our differences and acknowledging our need for one another. Resilience is pushing through life at full force. We are reminded of resilience, when we look back at all the name-calling we survived growing up for being Latina and speaking English with a “funny” accent. Resilience means not wiping the tears every time we are reminded of how hard is it to be fully accepted as a queer woman, but instead holding them tight. Resilience is exemplified by the lives of our ancestors whose struggles and passion for social justice have been passed on and have influenced all of us.

We admire our mothers, sisters, aunts and partners as women of resilience and we also admire warrior women, healers, artists and activists. We especially acknowledge our mothers who have been through adversity, who have risked everything to provide us with lives of hope and who persevere in raising beautiful girl children. We are motivated by our fellow
MataDanZers - each one brings hope, joy and inspiration. We honour all the movers and shakers of MataDanZe (both current members and the ones that have passed through) who take our breath away time and time again. Each one brings so much strength with their personal stories of resilience to never give up on our dream to empower women through movement. Some of our mothers are amazing and inspirational women, activists who will bend over backwards for those in need not wanting to be in a position of power but walking amongst the people and making many sacrifices to obtain equality. Survivors of injustice are all around us, offering hope and lending their energy to the fight as they persevere in the face of adversity. Like so many women who have endured abusive relationships and found their way out, the challenge is to stand tall, lead those behind and follow in the footsteps of courageous women who walk before us - steady and graceful, forever moving away from darkness into light.

We are inspired to continue our work because there still hundreds of women whose stories need to be told. The healing we personally feel when creating and sharing stories and the reflection and healing that others express when they experience our performances and workshops inspire us. We are inspired by the visceral feeling in our inner cores and by the endless stories of men and women whom have crossed our paths and ignited our minds. We are also inspired by the ancestral presence on this land we currently inhabit. Women, nature, passion, art and love are consistent inspirations that fuel the fire within. We are mindful of our responsibility to the future generations of women who will be faced with new challenges in an ever-evolving environment of warfare, that they may be empowered by movement to achieve their goals and live free from fear. The condition of the human consciousness is forever adapting in its need to survive. We are inspired to transform negativity into positive expressions of story-telling through movement.

Arts grants from organizations like the Canadian Council for the Arts and the Ontario Council for the Arts and our other sponsors help to support our work. We are also supported by our partners, families, friends, fellow MataDanZers and comrades, by a community of open minded, committed, respectful, loving dreamers and friends and by good health, trees, water and the sun. Although our communities might may not always share our passions, their give us their best energy so that we can continue our work. It is important that government authorities recognize that performance art has a place in society, to provide the non-ruling class with an outlet for creative expression that isn’t associated with cable or internet. Financial consideration should be given to the requirements of collectives whose projects benefit society’s disenfranchised members, women and youth. The generous support of loved ones is what gives possibility to our dreams.

We hope that our activism will inspire and touch many women around the world through dance, and plant seeds of hope in their lives. We hope it will raise consciousness, provide genuine support and lend strength to progressive social and political people’s movements, and inspire other women to tell their stories of struggle, solidarity, courage and transformation. Our ultimate goal is for MataDanZe to share their stories all over the Americas. As daughters of these continents known today as the Americas, we hope to one day have visited, created and shared with each country of the Americas stories of women from our neighboring countries. We hope that MataDanZe will always inspire other individuals to tell their stories through movement and the body. We never know when our story is the breath of air and transformation for someone else. We want to contribute to the ongoing work that many of us are contributing to make a better world. We are interested in an evolutionary shift in dance-theatre performance, where audience participation involves direct interaction with the story-telling as it evolves in the space and to further influence feminist studies as our audiences react cathartically to our performances.
I was a teacher in Somalia, but now I am a Community Support Worker at Model Schools for Inner Cities- Toronto District School Board (TDSB). I am also involved with the Jamestown Women and Family Services who provides supports to newcomer/refugee families and their children.

I started to volunteer as early as 1995. Many Somalis who live in Toronto were refugees who were forced to leave their homes/country due to civil war. Because of that traumatic experience, language barriers, culture difference and limited resources, many Somali families have faced huge challenges and difficulties adapting to the Canadian system. For instance, challenges in education, immigration, with the legal system, lack of affordable housing, employment, social isolation, interpreter/translator. These were many of the areas of focus that I helped to support for newcomer Somali families.

I was inspired at first because I thought that as an educator, I have experienced many challenges to find out the right resources and information to adapt and navigate effectively Canada as a refugee. My inspiration also came from my interest and support for Somali parents who cannot effectively communicate for their rights in the Canadian context and who had just escaped conflict and civil war that had impacted so many of their families and neighbours. Hence, as a parent and community member, I decided to share and provide information to the parents who need the support to address their needs. I outreached to parents by knocking at their doors and asking to read their children’s report cards in order to interpret it into Somali so they could understand. In this role, I helped parents to understand the expectation of the schools. I worked with the parents through parental workshops and connecting them with community and mainstream organizations that address their needs. I also work closely with schools so that their staff understand Somalia culture and I assist by filling out registration forms for new students.

Once I was working in school and I found out that some of the students had never had opportunity to enjoy the summer holidays. I decided to give the students an opportunity to

Khadra Hussein

“Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day; teach him how to fish and you feed him for a lifetime.”

-Chinese Proverb
enjoy and enrich their learning capacity during the summer. For two years, I developed and delivered a very successful enrichment summer program with no cost to over 150 students who participated in this program. With support of Humber College, TDSB, Tropicana and different community organizations we were able to develop an effective program for the students as well as delivering a Women’s Night Out program for educational information and networking for the mothers.

The person that I admire the most for her resiliency is my mom because she raised me to be a very resourceful person. My mother is hard-working, ambitious, resilient and treats others with respect.

I am inspired to continue because life is short and you can’t take it with you. My vision is to reach out to people who can take advantage from my support. I believe that making differences in someone’s life is my success and their happiness as well. I like to take the initiative when I see there is a need and opportunity to fix it - even visiting by their homes, gathering places etc. to develop trust and caring relationship. I see problems as a window of opportunity.

I believe in promoting community health and connecting people to ideas and resources. This is essential because you need to provide an opportunity to listen to the problems people are facing. Only then will you be able to have an open dialogue to understand the underlying concerns of the people you are serving. It is essential to include the people’s ideas as part of the solution. People know what is best for them. When someone shares something with you and you benefit from it, you have a moral obligation to share it with others.

I hope to achieve the creation of awareness about refugee needs. Volunteering is not a choice, it is a responsibility
Everything I do is advocacy oriented. Between 1995 and 2002, I worked with the Ethno Racial People with Disabilities Coalition of Ontario (ERDCO) as both a staff member and board chair, often in close connection with Women’s Health in Women’s Hands where I was concerned with the intersectionalities of people with disabilities. My interest in grassroots activism around disabilities developed further when I was hired for a one-year contract with the Canadian National Institute for the Blind and I worked with Employment ACCESS and the Coalition for Persons with Disabilities in Peel-Halton-Dufferin. I am a founding member of the Canadian Association of Muslim Women with Disabilities. I now run DiversityWorx, a private consultancy company, which helps organizations promote diversity in their work environment. Ever since I graduated from university 18 years ago, I have been involved with advocacy and working for change.

I am inspired to do this work because I got tired of the assumption that individuals with disabilities are dependent on the people in their lives, rather than seeing that people depend on them for their lives. I was inspired to change this misperception. As I became involved with ERDCO and others around me, I became more aware of the issues and that eventually led me to be a leading voice around the issues of disability and diversity.

To me, resilience means turning every obstacle into an opportunity. I am an optimist and that gives me the capacity to be resilient. I have never let any obstacle stop me from championing the rights of others.

A woman of resilience that I truly admire is Rafia Haniff-Cleofas. It was Rafia who first recognized the unique of issues of people with disabilities from ethno racial communities which led her to found ERDCO. She is a community activist who works tirelessly to educate and promote access and equity for people with disabilities within mainstream and ethno specific communities. She also served as board member of many groups including ERDCO, the Disabled Women’s Network (DAWN) Canada, the Centre for Independent Living in Toronto (CILT) and

Rabia Khedr
“Resilience means turning every obstacle into an opportunity.”
the Malvern Community Coalition. Rafia was the recipient of the 1993 Ontario Community Action Award. She is a woman who has greatly impacted my life and I look to her for advice.

I am inspired to do make change because somebody has to do it and it might as well be me. I am inspired by necessity - it is necessary and there are people who cannot give voice their issues. I am thankful that I had the opportunity to grow up in Canada and had access to education which opened doors for me. I have the ability to express myself and not give a damn, and that’s part of it. I believe in fairness and justice and spiritually and I want to put my beliefs into action.

If someone gave me a million dollars I could do a lot more than most people. I have a lot of assets - a supportive family, a well rounded lifestyle, parents and friends at my disposal and a husband who is a primary bread winner. I have skills and I choose to contribute them for positive change.

I hope that my activism and advocacy will achieve a real sense of belonging to our society for people with disabilities who are racialized and excluded from the mainstream.

I look at life as a journey that we are going to take. There is a beginning and an end. On this journey we have to make a difference in people’s lives. If we want to exercise our rights, we take responsibility that others share in those rights and we can’t just be complacent, we have to be active participants in exercising rights and responsibilities.
I do most of my stuff from meeting people with Wheel Trans for example or people I have known from before that I advocate for. Like this Sunday, I was shocked, I got four calls from people wondering about Wheel Trans. Somebody might have a problem but they’re afraid to speak about it so some of them ask me. I really like helping people. I go out with my attendants and I worry sometimes that they will get mad at me because I ask them “can you help her?” Especially when English isn’t someone’s first language, people yell at them and it’s like, you don’t have to yell. Or people who can’t hear. You can talk to them normal but a little bit clearer so they understand. Because I have trouble hearing too. You don’t have to be educated or anything to do that. My dad had a stroke, he was right handed all his life and all of a sudden he just picked up his left hand and started writing with it. You compensate for what’s missing so there is no need to yell at people. Its just ignorance.

I have been doing this work for 18 years, since 1994. I didn’t know anything about this before. It was after I became disabled. You’re not aware of anything until your eyes are opened and you’re into something and then you see it. But I think I became more involved in advocacy when Mike Harris was elected because that’s when I started feeling the cuts and I understood how service cuts actually happened – that it didn’t happen just like that and that legislature doesn’t say, oh yeah we’re going to do this and do that. People have to make it happen. That’s when I learned more about it.

I would say my own disability inspired me to do this work. For myself, seeing what it takes to get services. You have to open your mouth and speak. And then my concern started focusing on people who can’t speak for themselves. I speak so much and it’s so difficult. The people who don’t speak get nothing. Nobody cares. They get nothing. So I’d say my own disability and learning how difficult it is for people who can’t speak for themselves. So that’s what inspired me and continues to inspire me because it’s not getting better. In 2011 I thought it would be better. It’s not any better. Not better at all. Now we need it more than ever, right now.

When I stopped walking, I had no caregiver coming in. I just stopped walking one day. I had to reach out to people immediately to get help and I was shocked by how hard it was. I was
already in poor health. But you can’t go to bed, you can’t go to the bathroom because you can’t walk. It all happened in one day. I don’t know how I found the will to persevere except to say good neighbours and strangers even helped. So that was the hardest thing. All of a sudden I couldn’t even get into my bed.

I don’t have any heroines. I always teach my nephews and nieces to just be the best you can be. None of us can be like anybody else. We are all unique in our own terms. I’d say I admire the women I grew up with because most people think that if you come from an Indian culture, that the women are very subdued, that they are not allowed to be head of the household. But I came from women who were very active in their family lives. They did things that people here were shocked by. We had girl’s nights where the women would get together and their husbands couldn’t say no because they had to look after the children. And it started off with a Hindu wedding on a Friday night where they would do mehndi and they would dance and drink and party all night long. And Friday morning they’d hit the market to sell the produce. We were little girls. And that was another thing. The men were the farmers but the women were always the ones that sold the produce. The men never did because if you sent them to sell, they weren’t coming back until three days later and guess what – no money. The women were very strong. The women standing in the fields, they used to go watch Bollywood movies once a week. In their own way they were so strong where I came from. They managed the money. These are women I admire. I grew up with that; the everyday women who make differences.

It’s not really inspiration but I’d say Rob Ford makes me keep doing this work. I think society makes it so hard for people who have needs different than other people so I thought I was burned out. I thought I was too tired. But you can’t be because then nothing will get done and right now we need it more than ever. I’d say Rob Ford. He inspired me to get out there and do something because if you’re going to cut and cut then... I think society inspires me to do it in a good and bad way. You do what you have to do.

You need more input from people. You need people to speak out. You need to address situations that are not being addressed and at the same time you need to speak up and people are afraid to. I wish people would come out more and talk about stuff. For example, right now I have people getting two hours of homecare a day. They have to buy frozen food and all that craziness and they are afraid that if they go out and speak, that they will lose it. You shouldn’t have to prove yourself. I’m tired of having to prove my disability. It’s so obvious what the situation is yet you have to prove it again and again to the same people. So when this is being done to those select few who are afraid to, they think it’s ok because they meet no resistance. People need to call their MPs and report things. We need the support of all of society. I would hope it would achieve a kinder society. A more livable society. A more accepting society. Making society better. I want it to be happier, kinder, gentler, more compassionate.

I have my own. My quote is “I have a voice”. That’s what the whole process has taught me. I have a voice and I must use it. And you have to use that voice when there is injustice and you have to be outspoken but at the same time I guess be forgiving. Forgive others for their ignorance and hopefully they will learn from that. I have a voice and we all have a voice and we have to use it. I realized I couldn’t walk, I couldn’t use my arms but I still had a voice.

The whole idea is that more people need to get involved in however a form of advocacy they see fit. Disabled people, whatever your situation is. You have to come out and speak about it. Don’t be embarrassed. But the government seems to think that if you shut people up then they won’t have to deal with it. So that’s why you have to speak about it.
I work at the City of Toronto now (as the Director, Office of Equity, Diversity & Human Rights) but have worked in the community-base sector. I have been an immigrant/refugee rights and anti-racist activist, advocate, researcher and educator.

I am the past Executive Director of the Council of Agencies Serving South Asians (CASSA), past Executive Director of South Asian Legal Clinic of Ontario (SALCO), for the past 2 and a half years I have been the Economic Justice Fellow of the Atkinson Charitable Foundation. I have served as a board member and president of the Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants (OCASI) and numerous other community-based groups and agencies.

I have been in Canada for about 23 years and have been involved in community-based work, activism, volunteerism for about 20 of those years.

I was inspired to my work partly because of my personal experience of immigration and isolation, partly to get a job to make ends meet, and partly because of my conviction to make the world better for my Canadian born hyphenated and racialized children.

I came to Canada as an immigrant wife and soon became a mother. My self-defined world (as an educated and professional woman) changed dramatically to becoming an isolated immigrant mother with no social networks. My spouse was my only link to society. I suffered from depression and severe lack of self worth. One night a woman called my spouse to seek his advice and intervention not as a lawyer but as a community leader. Her spouse was drunk and abusive and she needed my husband to intervene but she did not want the matter to become public. My husband offered to help but asked me to find some services for the woman who was not fluent in English or French and was isolated. This forced me to come out of my self-pity mode to locate services in the woman’s geographic area that were both linguistically and culturally sensitive. Thus, I was introduced to the community-based ethno-cultural service sector.

Uzma Shakir

“If you have come here to feel pity for me, then you have wasted your time. If you have the same struggle as mine, then we can walk together for a while.”
This experience showed me that though as immigrant women we shared a common experience, my ability to access society gave me an advantage which was more systemic than personal. This was the beginning of a life that has been spent advocating, analyzing and deconstructing structural barriers that marginalize & empower people simultaneously and showing how class, gender, race, education, immigration status etc. impact our ability/in-ability to access services/opportunities and exercise our rights.

The woman of resilience I admire is my grandmother who came to Pakistan after the 1947 partition of India and Pakistan as a refugee – with nothing but the clothes on her body and six children. She was not formally educated and became a widow relatively young. But she made sure all her children (male and female – including my mother) got formal university education, read newspapers and books voraciously to keep up with the world around her, insisted on her grand-children (like myself) to get the best education including persuading my parents to send me for higher education and kept her family together. She loved Urdu poetry, music and cricket. Her resilience has always been an inspiration. She defied all social norms and commanded respect. She would never have described herself as a feminist but then that is the problem with feminism – it is all too often about labels and not the lived reality.

I am inspired in my work by my children; my social justice friends – activists, academics, service providers; the fact that Canada offers opportunities to write a history that is unique and can be exemplary; the incredible courage shown by people I have met and struggled with who are vulnerable in society but continue to strive for a better world.

I find a lack of common understanding, even amongst social justice activists and groups, on what is the change we seek and why? Often what is missing is an inability to acknowledge that in a highly stratified society like Canada where race, class, gender, status etc. complicate the social reality, it is critical for us to understand/locate our own privilege & work through it in a transparent way.

My hope is to inspire one person to act, to make one young person question the world around them critically, for one concrete initiative to produce a sustainable, equitable and just outcome.
I have been involved with Sherbourne Health Centre for six years. I was inspired to become involved in the kind of work that I do to help and support my community.

I don’t have one particular story in my life that exemplifies what resilience has meant to me but I have many stories of people who have made changes; my family for accepting me as I am and for the support and encouragement I get from friends, co-workers and my siblings.

Some resilient women that I admire are my mother my sister and women who have made changes. My mother for giving birth to me and accepting the changes in my life, my sister for being the one that was very accepting of my life changes and challenges, women who have overcome all obstacles to make a difference.

I am inspired to continue the work that I do by the community that I work for and the support and respect I achieve from this. I need personal and professional support to make my vision possible.

I hope that my work will change the way people think about others. If I can make a difference in one person’s life and that person can make a difference in someone else’s life then I have made an achievement.

Yasmeen Persad
“When you know better you do better”.
I am an afrikan-jamaican storyteller – dubpoet, monodramatist, and educator – who believes in art for social transformation. Storytelling was taught to me by my mother; she was taught storytelling by her mother. I create art that allows me (and the people who witness and participate in my work) to locate ourselves in complex conversations around identity, belonging, community, herstory, family, displacement and other ways in which we intersect and overlap. I create art about self-reflection and analysis within the context of social change, highlighting our collectivisms and individualities as a part of one humanity. It is important to work among people of our global community and experience our prisms of identity as we create stories about ourselves that reflect each other.

d’bi young is indeed one of North America’s most celebrated storytellers and for good reason. Throughout this decade alone she has created six albums, published three books, produced six plays, written the sankofa trilogy, starred in lord have mercy - Canada’s first multi-ethnic sitcom, featured in Trey Anthony’s Da Kink in My Hair, toured and lectured nationally and internationally, founded YEMOYA pan afrikan healing arts based in Cape Town South Africa participated in seven artist residencies, and garnered numerous awards and grants, all while raising her two young sons, moon and phoenix.

I really do believe that we’re all storytellers. I mean not everybody could do it professionally but I think that we all have a responsibility to acknowledge that we’re storytelling in whatever it is that we choose to do. The minute we acknowledge that then we can make choices around how we actually communicate with people.
Mujeres al Frente

Mujeres al Frente is a support organization for LBQQ and Trans people that come from or identify themselves as coming from Mexico, Central and South America. Our group started in March 2006.

Our reality as migrant women of colour, our sexual identity and the thousands of women and Trans persons that face oppressive and the systemic barriers of the immigration system, were our inspiration to form the group Mujeres al Frente. Our daily reality as we face language barriers, with exploitative employees, salary thieves; problems with paralegals and lawyers that see our cases just as another piece of paper, the lack of information to obtain primary healthcare in our language, the constant depressions and the traumatic impact of immigration, the latent risks of acquiring and/or transmitting sexually transmitted infections - all these problems were our inspiration to create this support group. We must be informed in order to identify all the types of oppression we are faced with so we can be empowered to demand and defend our rights.

There are lots of stories that exemplify what resistance means. They are all worth mentioning. Trying to exemplify specific situations and at the same time general situations, is when we are told “NO”. you don’t speak English, we can’t give you a job, we can’t accept you in school, I won’t pay you the minimum salary I’ll pay you less, we are not taking new patients, we don’t believe you we won’t give you residency. And after all those NOS, better said after the first NO, we turn around and we search somewhere else, and continue to search, we continue to resist while repeating in our minds “YES”.

The women of resilience we admire are our mothers, our grandmothers, our ancestors-indigenous women and black women.

We are inspired to continue to do our work by our own resistance and our daily reality.
To make our vision possible we need to be involved with organizations that possess the necessary economic resources so that we can obtain health services, legal support and settlement. Mujeres al Frente has vision but lacks the economic resources to accomplish our vision. We are not going to create a community center, a health or legal clinic, that is already in place. The only thing necessary is that existing services must be accessible to the population who needs it, specifically speaking of our population of Latina women of the LBQQ and Trans community. We want involvement and support to have workshops where we can revise all the oppressive systems so that we can identify them. We want to learn more about feminism.

It is our hope that our work will achieve a society where all women and Trans people empower themselves continue in resistance.
I am the founder of UMOVE (United Mothers Opposed to Violence Everywhere) and I have been doing this activism since June 2001.

I was inspired to start UMOVE by the murder of my only son, Justin at age 19, in June of 2001. Out of much sorrow came much resolve.

Justin’s death became my call to action. I didn’t know how I was going to survive without him as part of my life or where to turn. He was all I had and I knew I had to find strength somehow. I was searching for that beacon of hope. That’s when I found out that you never really get to know God until He is all you have. The Joy of The Lord became my strength. He reminded me that vengeance belongs to him and took away my obsession with pursuing vengeance for my son’s murder.

I admire Oprah Winfrey as a woman of resilience in particular, as she persevered despite the challenges she faced and became that rock of inspiration to so many others. I also admire Michelle Obama and a number of other black women who refused to be mediocre and prevailed in the face of adversity.

I am inspired by a deep passion in my heart for our youth and the reality of the issues they are combating on a daily basis. There were times when I wanted to give up but I realized that it is no longer about me or Justin, It’s about every mother’s son or daughter who needs to be empowered to rise to their full potential in life.

To make our vision possible we need financial support as well as support from the community, from the government and from the police. We would love to have an Operations Centre to facilitate our community outreach work.
I work to keep the legacy of my son and the sons of other mothers alive. The murderers may have destroyed the bodies of our children, but their spirits live on in us. I purpose in my heart to do whatever I can to make a difference and to promote peace and accountability in all communities.
I am a Nursing Professional, (RN, BN, MEd) and I am the Founder of the Black Youth Helpline Ontario; the Empowering Women Network and the Faith Health Initiative: a network of Faith Based organizations across Ontario partnering on community health promotion.

I have been engaged in volunteer community development efforts my entire life. As a little girl in Jamaica, I led after school programs in my parent’s backyard for the children of my high risk neighbourhood. My community involvement truly matured in 1992 in Winnipeg, Manitoba where I led the establishment of the Black Youth Helpline, Manitoba. I brought the volunteer driven Black Youth Helpline model to Ontario in 2003. My focus on faith based community health promotion started in Ontario in 2007.

My family, my place of birth and my faith have been my inspiration for community service. Caring for community and especially the most marginalized has always been the focal point of my personal endeavors. The community of “Jack Monday” in Jamaica, my birthplace, was reputable as one of Jamaica’s most high risk neighbourhoods. However, I experienced it as a wonderful blend of the rich, the middle class and the poor, a tight knit community where everyone mixed, worked together, cared for each other. My grandmother’s house was “grand central station.” Everyone in the neighbourhood knew she was always cooking and that she would not turn anyone away from her table. Looking back, I now see that as I eavesdropped into those discussions over dinner, she was really counseling others through life’s many challenges. I’m so proud of her because she was one of the cornerstones of our community.

One of my favourite stories of resilience occurred during my work with Aboriginal women in Manitoba in a College Health Care Aide program. The goal was to help women on social assistance return to the workforce through basic health care training. One of my students not only completed the Health Care Aide program but furthered her studies and went on to become a Medical Doctor serving her community on her reserve. This was in every way a great story of resilience: First and foremost, the resilience of all of the students, carving out a new career path for themselves. Secondly, it’s a great story of my own resilience as their teacher,
creating a curriculum that would help ensure student success and never abandoning a firm belief that each of my students would graduate. From social assistance to medical doctor! I am honored to have been part of her amazing journey.

The women of resilience I most admire are:
My grandmother: She was the cornerstone of the Jamaican community I grew up in. My Mother: She migrated to England when her kids were very young. She worked hard and singlehandedly established a foundation that is the pride of our entire family. My own daughter, now a Chartered Accountant. She overcame much adversity to succeed in her studies. Hers is a most compelling story of resilience!

Young people inspire me everyday! It is worth all the effort when I see youths break away from the stereotypes imposed on them, rise from the limitations of their upbringing and blossom into all they are meant to be. My faith constantly reaffirms for me that I’m on the right path, even in the face of those disappointments that can be inherent in community efforts.

Three (3) things are needed to support the community work I do:
1. Vote!!! I encourage everyone to become active in the democratic life of Canada. Vote every chance you get and mobilize others in your neighbourhoods to also vote.
2. Funding: Many of the most excellent community initiatives disappear due to lack of funding.
3. Mentors & Advocates – We have a rich and deep resource of talent in our community. We need more of them to ask; how can I help?

I hope that my work will contribute to healthy neighbourhoods and communities and to vibrant peoples mobilized to “act on their own behalf” to promote their educational, emotional, physical and financial health.
I am the founder and Executive Director of The Olive Branch of Hope and the President of the World Conference on Breast Cancer Foundation. I have been involved in breast cancer advocacy for 10 years.

I was inspired to do this advocacy when I was diagnosed with stage 3 advanced breast cancer in 1999. While looking for support I was shocked to discover the paucity of information for women of colour.

Most of us think growing up was tough, getting through high school, college, university, we can all remember something that happened to us where we showed some kind of resilience but for me it was more, it was the day I found out that I was facing my greatest battle yet. The day was Thursday February 22, 1999, by the time I heard the doctor say those four words that women dread, I had gone through four doctors and my first ever mammogram. From that moment the day was a complete blur, I can’t remember all of what happened after those words or even if the words were clear, I do remember something about breast cancer. By the end of the day I finally realized that if I was going to beat this thing that had invaded my body I would need to make some decisions about treatment which included surgery, chemotherapy and radiation. By the time I reached half way through the treatment it was clear that this was no picnic and if I would survive to tell the story and to help others I had to be strong and fight back, so I did. Twelve years later I am still here, I started an organization and completed advocacy training to help me in my mission to draw attention to the need in our community. The story of my fight against breast cancer exemplifies what resilience truly mean. When something bad happens to you, you don’t fold your arms and wait to die, you fight. I was not about to let breast cancer determine if I live or died, it was not going to take my dignity, it was not going to steal my joy and quest for life. I fought back and I won.

The woman of resilience I most admire is my mother first of all. I watched her though my early years and know that life was tough but she would always say what I now know to be scripture “It won’t be always like this” she was actually saying this too will pass. She is still alive today and I am proud of her continued courage and strength.

Leila Springer
“If a person has not found something worth dying for, they are not fit to live”
-Martin Luther King Jr
I also admire Tina Turner and Oprah Winfrey, not because of their fame or fortune but because of what they endured to be able to stand. I love their strength and having to fight back to show the world that it is possible is a great attribute.

I am inspired by speaking to women newly diagnosed with cancer who are feeling a sense of loss, fear, and hopelessness. After having the opportunity to talk to them and share my story and how I faced the challenge of cancer and overcame, watching the expression on their faces and knowing that I have given them hope to continue on the journey inspires me to continue the work that I do because I love people and know that in spite of what we face we can still achieve our goals.

To make my vision possible I need strong administrative support, financial support and a successful business mentor

I hope that, through my work, no woman will ever have to face cancer alone. I hope to contribute to a world without breast cancer.
I am employed by PASAN Prisoners HIV AIDS Support Action Network. PASAN is a community based organization working to provide advocacy, education and support to prisoners and youth in custody on HIV/AIDS and related issues. PASAN was formed in 1991 a grassroots response to the emerging AIDS crisis in the Canadian prison system. It is the only community based organization in Canada exclusively providing HIV/AIDS prevention, education and support services to prisoners, ex-prisoners, youth in custody and their families. I am also involved with Latin@s Positiv@s. I have been involved with activism for the past 16 years.

I was inspired to become involved in this work because I met the most amazing HIV Positive Women that were making a difference in the community through activism, peer work, speaking engagements and conferences and it inspired me to move beyond my HIV diagnosis and make a change.

A particular moment of inspiration for me was when a client come into my office and blessed me with her story of pain and hardship. This woman had been through rape, physical abuse and blatant HIV discrimination by her community in South Africa. She fled to Canada for the sake of her, and her child’s livelihood. All that hardship did not break her spirit and she now thrives in the community with one of her children and is still hopeful that she will have her oldest son come join her in Canada. I see her from time to time, still with a gentle smile on her face and the resilience to move forward with her life despite how hard life has been. When I’ve felt like giving up I remember her face and her smile and it gives me the strength to move pick myself up and continue the work I am doing.

Women of resilience who I admire are my Mom, María Pabon, Tiffany Kidman, Yvette Perrault, Lena Soje, Suzanne Paddock, Liz Morely, Rai Reece, Rebecca Reid, Kim Johnson, Paula Holmes, Rhonda Stephens, Vilma Geronimo, Eryka Ayala, Mooky Cherian and Trevor Gray. All these people have taught me that hardship and trauma in our lives can be overcome and it does not define who we are. Many of them have taught me how to do my work more effectively and the positive impact that it can make on PHA’s and the organizations that we work with.
I am inspired to continue doing my work by watching people living with HIV/AIDS and oppressed individuals transform themselves into amazing leaders and activists despite the barriers that are set before them. Seeing the Latina HIV community move beyond diagnosis step up and organize themselves around HIV/AIDS stigma. Watching women who at one time were timid and unheard, speak up and now be listened to.

To make our vision possible we obviously need more funding for organizations that serve marginalized populations. We need the financial resources to provide capacity for them to continue doing their work. Culturally appropriate services need to be provided to Prisoners/ex-prisoners, Latino PHA’s and women in order for these communities to thrive. Also these three specific communities need to be encouraged and included in all aspects of decision making in the AIDS movement.

I believe that if we continue giving prisoners living with Hep C and HIV the information and tools they need, they will be able to make effective and informed choices to improve their health and feel they are an important part of our society. The more we continue to include marginalized populations in the conversation of service delivery, the more we will see positive changes in the AIDS movement.
I am currently a professor at Sheridan College. I have been participating in political activism and as a community worker for the last 30 years – with the Latin American Coalition Against Racism, with Mujer,

I am inspired to be involved because I am a refugee from Chile and I become involved in activism when my family had to move to Canada after the coup d’état in Chile. Since then I have been involved in different kinds of activisms: solidarity movements, the feminist movement, the anti-racism movements and indigenous solidarity. I have also worked in community agencies and I have been active in struggling against violence against women, poverty issues, and policing issues.

I think that at different points in life we are all required to make decisions based on principles. These decisions usually mean facing harsh consequences, like not pleading guilty to trumped up charges or supporting a cause that may cost you your job for example.

I have many women to thank for who I am. Throughout my life, I have met incredible women who have influenced me. The women who survived political persecution, jail and torture and were able to continue to struggle for justice. The women who arrived in a new country without speaking the language and had to start their lives all over again, usually facing discrimination and racism. The women who fought against violence against women and were ostracized by their community. The women who taught me all I know about community organizing and have worked tirelessly for a better society and better conditions for other women. I know that I will never cease to learn from other women who constantly make me revise my ideas so as not to become stagnant and inspire me to be true to my ideals.

I am most inspired by the stubborn belief that we can and we will change the world. I believe that any kind of change requires collective effort. Therefore, the priorities are consciousness raising, education and mobilization. Sometimes this work can be very slow and frustrating but it’s also the key for change. And I hope that together we can achieve justice in the world.