

## **Kristen van Ginhoven: Keynote, District 1, Oct 28th, 2023- Halifax**

Hello Zontians!

It is such an honor to be here with all you incredibly inspiring people!

Today, in line with the conference theme of GROWTH: of growing your knowledge, connections and impact to make a better world for women and girls, I'd love to share how my time with WAM Theatre over the past 14 years has led to a personal growth journey that I could never have anticipated. I am such a different person now than when I started WAM 14 years ago - a more informed and evolved feminist and activist and, I hope, a more humble human.

So, today I'd love to share some of the stories of growth from the past 14 years and how they have led to the decision to step down from WAM at the end of this year.

I hope that by sharing this story, you will feel resonance and affirmation with your own growth journey, a sense of pride at your own accomplishments, maybe gain a few new strategies or gain a new tip or two, or find some new inspiration or courage to continue the very important work you are all doing here at Zonta, especially on those days when it feels that all we are doing around gender equity may not be making a dent, or indeed when we see it all going backwards.

### **But first-**

Halifax has had a challenging summer.

The impact of our climate crisis and how it perpetuates and magnifies structural inequities like gender equity sure has come to our doorsteps.

There is also more war in the world, not less.

The racial reckoning is ongoing and we continue to recover from a pandemic and so so much more.

We all deserve to recognize and feel our grief for the lost rights and decreased safety of women and girls.

It is indeed a critical time to stand together and I am honored to be with you all here today as we uplift women and girls.

It was also moving to begin today with an acknowledgment that we are in Mikmaki.

The most recent play I directed, WHAT THE CONSTITUTION MEANS TO ME, was produced in Albany, NY, where the Iroquois Confederacy was signed. In my research, I was told this story, which apparently came from Gloria Steinem, which I'd love to share with you as an acknowledgement of the lands we are on. America's founders, when creating the Constitution, asked the Iroquois elders, the male ones, to join them so they could learn from them, as the Constitution, in some ways, is inspired by the Iroquois Confederacy. Apparently, when the elders walked in, the first thing they said was 'where are the women'? Women were an integral part of the creation of the Iroquois Confederacy and in Native culture as a whole, so it is fitting to acknowledge the Mik Mak People while we launch this conference.

### **My connections to Zonta:**

It is also fitting to share with you my connections with Zonta.

My first connection to Zonta was a small presentation about WAM at a Berkshire Club Zonta dinner meeting. I was then invited to do the keynote at a Zonta District 1 meeting in Pittsfield in October 2015. Were any of you there?

Late Zonta members and incredible women, Keye Hollister and Millie Blum were the ones who made that keynote happen. I know they are smiling on this moment- thrilled that this journey with Zonta continues. Thank you Keye and Millie. And hello to the Berkshire County Club members here- Linda, Sheila, Christine and Sandy!

Then, in 2016, I was a keynote speaker for Zonta Florida as part of a Women's Empowerment Series, also thanks to Mille.

Then, earlier this year I was honored to be named one of the Berkshire Club's Zonta 2023 Women of the Year. At that event I met Donna, told her I went to... Dalhousie University, she worked her magic and with the help and generosity of Donna, Guardian Angel Mary and generosity of the Berkshire Chapter HERE I AM! Back in Halifax- what a FULL CIRCLE moment

### **My connections to Halifax:**

I have been wanting to come back here for so long. You see, the last time I was here I was a young, wide eyed newly minted college graduate in 1993. Right out of school, I was lucky enough to start working as an actor at Shakespeare by the Sea and Neptune Theatre. Perhaps some of you here saw me running around Point Pleasant park as Helena in A Midsummer Night's Dream or Rosalind in As you Like it, back in the late 1990's. That was such an exciting time, launching my professional career in the theatre. I remember being full of excitement and fear for the road ahead. I now return, over thirty years older, and feeling exactly the same way!

You know, I always wanted to retire here in Nova Scotia, it's all about quality here, not quantity- I LOVED that I could go to the store and people knew my name and wanted to take the time to have a chat. It's always people over product, relationship over transaction here. Those values were planted in me here in Nova Scotia and they have anchored me throughout my career.

I wanted to retire here until I moved to the Berkshires in 2008 and fell in love with it. With its incredible arts and culture and its glorious outdoor adventure. You all must come there the next time the Berkshire Club hosts as it's truly another astonishing place to be. Now I love both places and

couldn't be more privileged to have this very meaningful full circle moment....and I also have no idea where I will retire!

At the 2015 Zonta conference in the Berkshires, I told you the story of WAM Theatre, a professional theatre company I co-founded in 2010 that uses theatre to benefit women and girls. I shared with you all in 2015 where the inspiration came from to use theatre to take action for women and girls, how we went about implementing what we call our double philanthropic mission and how our first five years had gone. Since then, we've had our ten year anniversary, then a pandemic, and now, we are heading into our 15th anniversary season and in May of this year, we publicly announced I'd be stepping down from WAM and now, we are just about to hire our next artistic leader!

### **The story of WAM:**

You see, the story of WAM all started in 2009 when I read 'Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into Opportunity for Women Worldwide' by Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn. Has anyone here read it? (not surprised so many of you have!)

The book is full of stories of women all over the world who have found ways, through sheer courage, resilience and perseverance, to turn their oppression into opportunity.

The book's thesis is that the oppression of women and girls is the seminal moral issue of our time just as slavery was in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

In the book, Kristof and WuDunn say that 'Outsiders can truly make a significant difference'. You all know that to be true, but I never believed that before but the book thoroughly inspired me and made me want to take ACTION and join the MOVEMENT to emancipate WOMEN and girls.....Ergo WAM.

Prior to WAM, I had generally been one of those people who turned a blind eye to women's issues as they seemed so huge, so horrible, so

insurmountable, there was obviously no way I could make any difference, so I pretty much just ignored it all.

But, the book inspired me so much that when I put it down I knew I wanted to take action. As a theatre artist, I wanted to find a way to use what I do to benefit women and girls. I knew that I didn't have the resilience at the time to be on the front lines and deal head on with issues like sex trafficking or gender based violence because I am a highly sensitive person, but I knew I could create an entertaining evening in the theatre and that I could use that as my philanthropy to support those people whom we desperately need- the ones who are brave enough to be on the front lines.

The first part of WAM's mission states that we create theatrical events for everyone, with a focus on women theatre artists and/or the stories of women and girls. That means we raise funds to produce professional plays. Especially ones by women playwrights or ones that share the stories of women and girls. The first part of our mission also means we create jobs for professional theatre artists; actors, designers, stage managers and in particular women theatre artists.

The second part of our double philanthropic mission states that we donate a portion of proceeds from our events to organizations that benefit the lives of women and girls. That means we work really hard to get people to come and pay to see the plays we produce. Then we donate a portion of the box office proceeds to the women's organization we have chosen as the recipient for that production. We choose a different organization for each production and we have a very thoughtful and intentional process around the selection. To date, we have donated nearly \$100,000 to 25 local and global organizations.

Our donations have helped:

- women who want to engage with their civic duty take leadership classes
- Helped Indigenous women have healing circles
- Helped women-led community organizations defend and advance the rights of poor people and promote fair elections

- We've kept girls in school and helped provide scholarships for girls to study with professional scientists.
- We've helped women rebuild after an earthquake
- and we've helped immigrant women who were victims of domestic violence gain the help they need on their path to a green card.

One year, we gave to a program called Rope, the Rites of Passage and Empowerment for Girls program. Thanks to a donation they received from WAM, they were able to take all their girls on a college tour - many of the girls in the program were among the first in their family to go to college and normally ROPE would only be able to take a few of the girls on the college tour. But, thanks to our production being a success, we were able to donate enough that they were able to take 2 van loads of all girls on the tour.

I often think of those 8th graders, standing on a college campus, thinking 'maybe I could go here someday' and they are standing there because WAM put on a play. The most amazing thing is that those 8th grade girls are now graduating from those colleges!

My feelings about WAM are best encapsulated when I'm standing onstage after the final curtain call of a closing performance, getting ready to make the donation to our recipient.

I look over at the artists, many of whom are women and all of whom are paid, I look over at the audience, who has just enjoyed a story written by a woman playwright, which makes me so proud considering less than 20% of all plays produced nationally are written by women and finally, I look over at our recipients, who are about to receive a donation and I think of the impact WAM has beyond jobs and storytelling.

I think about the 13 housemothers at the Mother of Peace Orphanage in South Africa, who were the beneficiaries of a 2014 production. I heard about them through a local Berkshire resident who had long been involved with the Orphanage. Her dream was for the Housemothers of the Orphanage to have some money of their own. You see- those 13 Housemothers raise 84 orphaned children in mother-headed households and in return, they get housing and food, and a whole lot of love.

So, thanks to the success of a show called 'In Darfur', about the internally displaced persons in Darfur, we were able to donate \$385 to each mother, which is the equivalent of @ \$4000 South African dollars. Many of them used it to further their education and one of them built a room onto her house that is now a rental income. How's that for economic empowerment! (12 min)

The impact WAM has had over the years reminds me in a small way of the enormous impact Zonta has had since its founding. It's extraordinary what you all accomplish each year to better the lives of women and girls.

### **How far I've come:**

So - With passion the idea to start WAM was born, but it's the hard work of building a non-profit that has made the idea a reality.

Some of you here are entrepreneurs, or lead companies or departments, but for me, starting WAM was the first time I'd been a producer. I started as an actor, became a teacher and a director and now, filled with the energizing desire to create opportunity for women and girls through theatre, I was a producer. I went through loads of what I call '101 classes'.

Here are some of the things we did in that first year back in 2010 that I had to learn how to do from scratch- it was a huge growth curve: We created a website, a blog, a facebook and twitter page, eblasts, enewsletters

We became an official non-profit, built a board and learned how to put that all important donate now button for our website

We sent a letter to 100 of our closest family and friends and started raising \$\$.

We learned how to write a press release, create a press list, build relationships with the press...

Throughout the learning curve I did an extraordinary amount of on the job learning and for the first time in my life, I was not afraid to ask for help when I didn't know what something meant, especially when negotiating contracts, getting insurance, organizing travel, dealing with the actor's union, keeping track of our financial records, you name it, I had to learn about it and needed help doing so.

That doesn't mean I wasn't terrified and nervous about every single thing all the time, it just meant that I wasn't afraid to ask for help and I was motivated to move through my nerves and fear because the mission felt more important than my own nerves and fear.

My learning curve was not only around logistics and running a company. It was also around my own cultural competency and white privilege.

One story of growth for me in this area came a few years ago, when a dear, respected colleague of color said to me - 'white women always need time'. I asked her to explain that more to me. She said- having the time to ponder and think about something is a privilege that can come with being white.

She doesn't have that luxury. If she's in a meeting and a racist comment is made, she has to speak up or let the moment pass, which reinforces unjust behavior. This wonderful colleague said to me that all too often, she is in a meeting with white, supportive colleagues, something uncomfortable happens and they all complain about it in the bar afterwards, but at that moment, none of them speak up.

She said this exact thing actually had happened to her at a recent town hall meeting. And when she asked her white colleagues in the bar afterwards why they didn't speak up, they said things like 'I didn't know what to say', 'I was afraid I'd say the wrong thing', 'I panicked' or 'I needed time to think'.



This discomfort around speaking up in the moment sounded all too familiar to me.

I realized at that moment that if I truly believe in a culture of empathy, equity and belonging, which I do, then this discomfort around speaking up is something I had to learn to move through.

It was my responsibility, as her colleague, as a change-maker in our community and as a human being, to own the power of my privilege and speak up. (15 min)

Since then, WAM has become a civic organization that embraces intersectional feminism (feminism that acknowledges how multiple forms of discrimination overlap). Like all of you in this room, WAM understands that to address one piece of systemic discrimination means we have to address them all and this is on-going active personal and professional work at WAM for the staff and board.

I have poured my heart and soul into WAM for the past 14 years. And I have learned a ton along the way about myself, my community and the power of speaking up.

- I've learned, for example, that I have way more resilience than I thought, that I am able to ask for help when I need it and that it's ok to say these three powerful words- 'I don't know'.
- I have learned not to say 'I just run a small theatre company' and diminish the very real impact of our work.
- I have learned about the complexities of the word 'woman' in today's world and the value of including men in the conversation around women's issues. We need them.

- I have learned the infinite value of building relationships and making connections, especially with people who are not like me.
- I have learned how important it is to truly understand the word intersectional and find ways to engage in dialogue around the intersecting issues of racism, homophobia, ableism and transphobia, for example.
- I have also learned about how hard it is to talk to people about women's issues if they think there aren't any anymore.

Along the way, I have learned about the plethora of incredible people in our community who are doing the hard, hard work of trying to create opportunity for every member of our beloved community. I'm sure you all know a ton of these people and are all these people yourselves!

Over and over again, my eyes have been opened to the very real struggles people are going through in our community and to the amazing people who are doing all they can to help people overcome those struggles.

And over and over again, I have also learned about the constant struggle of wanting to give up, because, for me with my highly sensitive personality, it always all feels too hard. Every single day. Most days I have a moment of complete overwhelm where I have no idea how I will get through, or I simply want to go into my bed and hide. Just quit, you know? I imagine many of you can relate.

And then, I remember the stories of the incredible women featured in HALF THE SKY or my wonderful colleague at her town hall meeting and all the amazing people working hard for a better life and I know I have to go on.

After all, others are trying to survive, I'm simply trying to put on a play!

So, I do my meditation, I take a walk in nature, or take a long hot bath or read People magazine or any of the other strategies I've gained along the way to stay centered and calm and I keep going.

I often refer to WAM as my PhD. I genuinely always felt that WAM is where all my growth and awakening as a person and activist was happening. And there sure has been a lot of that.

Here are some more key ways my work at WAM has deepened my growth and changed my perspective: (17 min)

### **1) Cultural Humility**

This is the biggest one for me overall. Cultural humility is a practice of self-reflection on how one's own background and the background of others, impact teaching, learning, research, engagement, leadership, relationships, etc. As I continue to challenge myself to question my ego and dial up my humility, I experience deeper meaning, fulfillment and community in the work. I haven't yet found ease with the new culturally humble Kristen, but I have made strides in getting to know her and having her find her feet. She has come out more and more which feels lovingly aligned with how I want and need to walk through the world.

### **2) Positive Psychology/Character Strengths**

Positive psychology forms the basis of my work as a leader now. I regularly have opening quotes at meetings, moments of mindfulness meditation as a team, random dance breaks, regular gratitude practices (like how grateful I feel about being here today!) and ask questions and do activities that promote positive emotions.

I also now have an ongoing practice of pointing out character strengths to my team members. Have any of you heard of the VIA character strengths? If you like a good test, go home and do it- it's an awesome way to find out more about yourself. Pointing out my team's character strengths is very aligned with my own love language to provide affirmation and the team has expressed that they appreciate it also. I realize, as I give the feedback to the team and to artists who work with us about their character strengths, that they rarely hear this sort of feedback. They are inevitably a bit embarrassed but proud and happy to hear it, which feels great!

I personally also now have a clear set of values that guides and anchors my work as a leader. They are: **Abundance, Making a Difference, Flexibility, Self Development and Appreciation.**

### **3) A few more golden nuggets I carry with me include.....**

Around Listening:

Don't talk so much (which is funny given I've been talking now for close to 20 minutes:).

Focus on building meaningful relationships.

Lead with curiosity.

Let go of the task/action and focus on the relationship. On being.

Listen for thoughts, emotions, values.

Around Speaking up:

A question I often ask myself now, after learning this from a coach in an Inclusive Leadership program is 'How much of my light does this room need? Any? A cozy light in the corner, a shining spotlight on someone else, a full on blast of light- like today?

How can I speak up with humility? How can I always make sure to ask clarifying questions. Can I pause for 7 seconds if things get uncomfortable? How can I make sure I don't let a moment of harm go by if I'm a bystander. If it does, I try to circle back later. I ask myself how I can engage best in that moment.

I often think of the 5 D's I learned from a free Right To Be training, that anyone can do online at [righttobe.org](http://righttobe.org) about how to be a good bystander: document, distract, delegate, delay, direct. (document what I'm seeing somehow, distract somehow, delegate to someone official, delay by circling back later to check in, or address the situation directly if that is safe)

Around Responding:

How can I respond rather than react? We all know that famous saying attributed to Viktor Frankl- "Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom"

Here are three questions I try to ask myself as I contemplate a response: Is it kind? Is it true? Is it necessary?

I try not to do anything without thinking it through. I try to talk to whoever needs to be involved. I try to figure out if it's actually wanted/needed. I don't just DO.

Most importantly, I observe what is going on in my body. It's become so important to observe my own body in different situations, especially difficult ones, and acknowledge what's going on there and how that can inform

what my response could be. I Pause. I Breathe. I Have the courage to be vulnerable.

#### **4) It's a marathon not a sprint**

I now realize that everything I've learned in my life so far has been based in Sexism, Racism, Ableism, Classism, Neurotypicalism, Ageism....Our brains are scientifically, historically and socially conditioned to have bias. So I must question Every. Single. Thing.

I try to put everything through the lens of belonging now- I ask myself: who is being left out? Who is not being considered? Why would these decisions be made? Who do they benefit? Sometimes, It's mind boggling to take that all in...

So- resting is ok. It's actually healthy and deepens lifelong learning.

Rest is an essential part of the care required for this kind of gender equity work to be sustainable.

SO, as you can see, over the years, my own learning curve at WAM has never stopped.

Alongside all this growth, WAM started with a budget of \$10,000 and one volunteer person (me!) in 2010. In 2015, when I spoke for Zonta in the Berkshires, the budget was \$240,000 with 8 part-time staff (one of whom was me) and now, as I prepare to step down from WAM, our budget is \$500,000 with 2 full-time staff (one of whom is me!), 4 part-time staff and an incredibly committed community of volunteers, led by our predominantly BIPOC board.

That is huge growth.

We are very proud of it and we've worked hard for it and we plan to continue working hard for it, especially now, when issues of equality for women and girls, and indeed for ALL, continue to be so urgent. (25 min)

### **Where I am now:**

But, I will not be the one working directly towards that at WAM anymore because..... in June 2022, I announced to the board and team that I would be stepping down at the end of this year.

My succession is something we all have been talking about in some form or over over the past few years - starting after the end of my marriage and my divorce in 2018 when my financial future changed drastically, through WAM's 10th anniversary in 2019, and more recently, during the pandemic, the racial reckoning and my own ongoing cultural competency training. We'd had many conversations about succession and when was the right time for me to step aside.

Then, in early 2021 I took a medical leave to help take care of my mom after she was diagnosed with cancer. She is a warrior and I'm thrilled to say she's still here, stubbornly wanting to make it to her 90th birthday in December, which I hope she does. But during that leave, I was faced with my mom's mortality and my own 50th birthday and had lots of reflections about my professional future. I was able to find some clarity around what's best for WAM's next chapter and what I'm craving for my own next chapter.

I have spent 14 years building WAM. I am someone who has had quite a few working adventures in my life (I started here an actor, I became a teacher overseas, now I was a producing artistic director) and, when I weighed out all the different aspects of this decision, it wasn't that I am not excited about the prospect of leading WAM for another 15 years- the work is incredibly purposeful and meaningful.

What it ultimately came down to is that I want at least one more big adventure in my professional life. And, as I turn 50, I recognize, without any

pleasure, that it is still true that the older I get the harder it will be for me to find my next job. Therefore, I concluded that if I was going to make a leap and see what else might be out there for me, the time was now.

Founding WAM has been the most meaningful experience of my professional life thus far. Nurturing it to a place where I know I can step aside and it is 200% ready to fly into the next phase of impact without me is such an accomplishment.

I'm proud to say that over 40 people applied for my job.

Just last week we interviewed the final three candidates and I was so proud. These three extraordinary women, all so passionate about this organization and this job, that I had created from nothing!

All I can say is that I'm glad it's the team and the board that are deciding who to hire because I wouldn't have a clue.

As for what I'm going to do next, that remains an open question. I am leaping, as they say, without a net. Which is completely terrifying! On the good days I feel really hopeful and courageous and on the bad days I feel scared and irresponsible. But, deep down, I know it's the right thing to do, so I continue to find my way as I explore different possible opportunities and remain hopeful that some will also come my way.

I love the Berkshires and would be delighted to stay there if the right opportunity came along. I also am open to new adventures in other places, including here, or somewhere else in my home country of Canada. As long as there are nice places to hike, nature to keep me grounded, and enough liberal minded folks to keep me sane, I'm open.

So, if you know of an opportunity in the theatre, arts, advocacy, gender equity or social justice where my leadership, artistic, and activist skills would be of service, please connect me!

There's not much I know for sure right now as I leap into the unknown with courageous vulnerability but one thing I know for sure is that Zonta will remain an important part of my future!



Zonta is an incredible organization and you are all doing such incredible and important work. The greatest opportunity Zonta members have is to inspire a whole new generation of women to join your ranks to help effect change for women and girls. We are indeed stronger together, so, I will do what I can to encourage more women to join Zonta and if you do the same, together, we can effect some beautiful change together.

Thank you so much for inviting me to speak and special thanks again to Donna, Mary and the Zonta Club of the Berkshires for making this possible.

I'm happy to take any questions and am so grateful for the incredible opportunity to come full circle in Halifax. Enjoy the rest of the conference!