

Michelle Baldwin – Our Community Synergizer
Leading the growth of London's nonprofit network
By Saumya Krishna

When Michelle Baldwin, the Executive Director of the Pillar NonProfit Network, steps into her downtown London office, the place is already humming with energy. A distinct sense of buoyant enthusiasm emanates from the beaming faces that have arrived at work. Instinctively, you realize that this is an exciting place to be. Furthermore, in meeting the dynamic Michelle Baldwin, you begin to suspect that she has played a key role in fashioning and maintaining this atmosphere, both in her organization and in the broader community.

In 2001, based on discussions held at the Community Volunteer Summit in London, the Pillar NonProfit Network was established as a not-for-profit entity to enhance the visibility, credibility, capacity and professionalism of the nonprofit sector. Within ten years, Pillar has become *the* voice of the nonprofit sector in London—a keystone umbrella organization that provides comprehensive support to over three hundred nonprofit groups in the city. Michelle Baldwin has adeptly orchestrated the unifying and strengthening of this sector, nurturing a widespread professional culture of collaboration and openness.

In leading this organization over the past six years, the passion and commitment that Michelle has injected into her role is unquestionable. On the internet, one can quickly find a video of Michelle handing out fortune cookies in Victoria Park on a weekend, with a “Be the Change” message, encouraging locals to get involved in their community and make a difference (Michelle Baldwin’s Act of

Kindness, 2011). In another YouTube clip, she is galvanizing her audience at an evening Ignite London event with a rallying speech about the impact affected by London's nonprofit sector (Blair, 2010). She also 'tweets' daily about all things relevant to the nonprofit sector and the London community. Evidently, Michelle is rather involved in her community. "I think having a presence as a leader is very important," she says early on in our interview.

This sense of civic engagement has been a defining characteristic of her life. Growing up in London, Michelle's early volunteer roles exposed her to the activities of the nonprofit sector, providing her the opportunity to simultaneously hone her leadership and relationship skills. Unknowingly, she was preparing herself for dynamic future leadership roles as a mover-and-shaker in Canada. One particular volunteer experience jumps out in her mind as she reflects on her community involvements as a youth. She had been volunteering with a child who had a degenerative disease, and whose mother had demonstrated an unwavering sense of positivity and faith. From that experience, she had learned that leadership is about taking personal responsibility for your situation and "recognizing the unique gifts of every single person."

This optimistic attitude permeates the Pillar offices on the second floor of the Central Library, where Michelle describes herself as a community synergizer. She adds, "What I mean by that is being a community *connector*. This is what I love about Pillar's role—social glue-making. We are about making connections. At Pillar, and even in my personal life, I enjoy bringing people together, making connections and keeping those connections alive." In addition to the lessons learned from volunteer

experiences and from her earlier work at the Brain Tumour Foundation of Canada and the Thames Valley Children's Centre, she identifies the founder of Pillar NonProfit, Willy Van Klooster, as a role model. She explains, "When he looked at creating an organization, he very much inspired other people to get involved and he let them lead. It is about finding the right people to make it happen and empowering them—you need to trust in the wisdom of the group." This leadership philosophy rooted in collaboration resonates deeply with Michelle and shapes her approach to building the nonprofit sector. She adds, "I value collaborative leadership because I think that is the way you move a community forward. There are a lot of silos in the community. Yet, not one leader, not one sector, nobody can do it alone. It's about trust and collaboration."

However, undertaking the task of the social glue-maker is not so simple. For Michelle, it has necessitated continuous dedication, resiliency, and openness to learning. Reflecting back on her earlier years at Pillar, she points out, "I used to say 'yes' to everything, and I learned quite quickly that you cannot always do that. Thinking about the values of your organization, thinking about strategy is important for decision-making." Ironically, the most exciting part of her role is also one of the most complicated. On one hand, she says, "The thing I love about my job is that there is a blend of personal and professional—it's all together. The hard part is that sometimes I know I work too hard. Trying to make sure I create space for family and for other things in my life is important." In thinking about the balancing act of her leadership role, Michelle emphasizes the value in taking time to recalibrate and do something she refers to as 'visioning', which entails stepping back to think about

whether you are on the right track and what you can do differently. Another stabilizing factor in her life has been her support system. Michelle explains, “My best friend is an Executive Director of a nonprofit and we have a huge mentoring relationship—we challenge each other and push each other. You cannot easily tell anyone about your deepest, darkest fears and what is keeping you up at night. So, I think it’s really important to have those people with whom you can have harder conversations and be *vulnerable*.” In fact, recognizing the need for such a support system in the nonprofit sector, Michelle initiated an Executive Director peer-learning circle at Pillar so that other leaders also have an avenue for support. Every six weeks, small groups of Executive Directors come together to address common challenges, exchange ideas and share solutions. Pillar provides a place for trust in which this peer mentorship and leadership development can occur.

Vulnerability is an emotional experience that Michelle has come to particularly appreciate. Sharing her thoughts around the meaning of leadership, she explains, “In my early days here, I was wrapped up in a package, wanting to show positivity and demonstrate that everything was going well so that others had trust in me. There is a risk in being positive all the time because the reality is that leadership is not that easy. Vulnerability is very important—that’s when you show you are an authentic leader and people can trust you... Over the years, it is something that I have become much more open to.” This notion of vulnerability connects intimately with Michelle’s preference for a more humble and egalitarian notion of leadership. In stressing the impactful role that each individual can play in the community, she says, “Even though I am in a leadership role, I am no more

important than a volunteer who is working frontline somewhere else. We are all doing our pieces and I think that is very important. Sometimes we put people on a pedestal and we really need to be careful not to do that.” Michelle’s commitment to collaboration and collective impact is at the crux of her work at Pillar and her mindset as a leader. In fact, Michelle says that it is through her most difficult experiences that she has come to understand the importance of group dynamics. She explains, “If you are not working with people who are truly collaborative and can leave the ego behind, it is very difficult to move things forward, no matter how amazing the project is.”

Bundled with her valuable learning experiences, Michelle also has many accomplishments to celebrate. The aggregate impact created by Pillar is astounding. In 2011, over 1800 people attended Pillar’s professional development programs and more than 19,000 people received support from Pillar in finding volunteer opportunities (About Pillar Nonprofit Network, 2012). Michelle and her team have played a leading role in catalyzing London’s voluntary sector, which generates an economic value of approximately \$672 million a year. For Michelle, however, the significant achievement lies in creating a shift in attitude toward the nonprofit sector. She explains, “When I was part of Pillar ten years ago, we had this vision of the three sectors coming together and the nonprofit sector being at the table when we talk about economic development and our community. We have hit that tipping point where we are consistently asked to be a part of the big conversations. That I am very happy about. It has taken a lot of relationship and trust building to get

there.” Her impact on the community is rooted in cross sector collaboration and innovation.

Michelle also brings these qualities to her role on the board of the Emerging Leaders Network, which provides support to young leaders in the community. In speaking to youth, she stresses the importance of taking risks and being open to failure. “Surround yourself with like-minded people but also try to get outside your comfort zone.” Her personal experiences stand as a testament to the growth that comes from vulnerability. To further support a culture of entrepreneurial leadership in London, Michelle is on the founding team of the Awesome London chapter. As part of the internationally-acclaimed Awesome Foundation, this group will distribute monthly \$1,000 grants to local projects in the interests of furthering the amount of ‘awesomeness’ in the city. For Michelle, this is quite an exciting endeavour outside of her work at Pillar. In her own way, she wants to continue empowering the community so that we can collectively move the needle on impact. “Awesome London is something new that is truly about citizen engagement...using a social innovation and entrepreneurship lens to move the community forward. I think there are a lot of fabulous ideas out there. At its core, Awesome London represents dreaming about what is possible.”

Works Cited

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