
150 Profiles: Arti Freeman

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As we mark the 150th anniversary of confederation, The Philanthropist is profiling Canadians from across the non-profit sector and putting a face to 150 individuals who work or volunteer in Canada's social sector.



Name: Arti Freeman

Profession (current role in the sector): Grantmaker

Years working and/or volunteering in the non-profit sector: 25

Can you describe a defining moment in your career working/volunteering in the non-profit sector?

I'm not sure if what I'm about to describe constitutes as 'defining moments'. Certainly they were significant shifts in mental models and paradigms that altered the way I work. I strongly believe that with every shift, the impact of my work increased.

1. No Limits. In my early years as a volunteer I participated in a workshop on goal setting. I remember hearing the presenter quote Gandhi: "Man is the center of a circle without a circumference, except the one he creates for himself." I suddenly realized that the barriers and limitations which stop us from achieving our goals are only there because we place them there. In that moment I experienced a new freedom and tenacity to create and drive change in my community and in the world. My first change initiative addressed the littering problem in my community. I developed a program that sourced garbage bins out of recycled rubber tires and placed them around the neighborhood. I had engaged small business owners, the local municipality, my school, and the NGO I was volunteering with in order to raise the funds needed for the tires, generate social capital and raise public awareness of the issue. While the bins were properly placed, it didn't quite change the behaviour I desired, which was to use the bins and stop littering. At this time, I hadn't yet realized the importance of points 2 and 3.

2. From Mobilizing to Organizing. In my mid-20's, my work involved mobilizing young people to address community challenges and global issues. My role was to help young people identify community issues, develop a project plan, and increase their project management skills in order to execute that plan. During this time, I was also working on a global initiative to address the capacity needs of NGO's. I found myself at an international conference being challenged by someone who inquired if I had asked the community being impacted what their thoughts were on how best to address the issue. I was stumped. I had never thought of doing that, let alone supporting the youth I was working with to do that. This insight led me to a shift from mobilizing to organizing. Instead of mobilizing people around my ideas alone, I sought to bring together diverse peoples, ideas and resources, in order to collectively inform and articulate the need, as well as explore and execute solutions together.

3. Ask the Right Questions. Over the last 10 years, I experienced another shift through a series of opportunities that presented themselves. During this time I learned how to: reframe a problem, move toward a 'networked' mindset, and link questions to specific outcomes. These skills have enabled me to uncover new and better insights, as well as sharpened my ability to see future possibilities. It has also enabled me to make better decisions informed by learning, and be more intentional about articulating and achieving desired change/outcomes.

Describe your desk/workspace.

Mobile minimalist. I have a mobile workspace which mainly consists of my laptop, phone, and a journal.

What are you reading or following that has expanded your understanding of the non-profit sector?

There are so many valuable resources available to us today. Websites, publications and Twitter feed of other funders, non-profit organizations, and intermediaries such as [MowatNFP](#), [Ontario](#)

[Nonprofit Network](#), [Imagine Canada](#), [GrantCraft](#), [Grantmakers for Effective Organizations](#) and [Youth REX](#), to name a few, provide relevant research and trends in the non-profit sector as well as support the capacity and development of the sector.

I also frequently read articles from digital journals such as the [Stanford Social Innovation Review](#), [Strategy+Business](#) and of course, [The Philanthropist](#). Some of the articles I've found insightful include: '[Indigenous Youth Voice and the Role of Philanthropy](#)', '[The Networked Nonprofit](#)', '[Using Data for Action and for Impact](#)', '[Signals of Transformation: What Will 2017 Bring for Canada's Non-profit Sector?](#)', and '[Are You a Collaborative Leader?](#)'

Many of the books I've read have increased my understanding of leadership, organizational development, and social change. My diverse recommended reading list include, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, *The Fifth Discipline*, *Our Iceberg is Melting*, *Banker to the Poor*, *Getting to Maybe*, and *Power and Love*.

Given my current role at the Ontario Trillium Foundation, I also read relevant reports published by UNICEF, OECD, and government agencies such as the Ontario Ministry of Children and Youth Services, as well as that of other non-profits serving children and youth. I have found that reading broadens my perspective and understanding, as well as enables me stay on top of trends and opportunities.

While I do find reading a great tool for learning, it is important for me to note that conversations I've had with a diverse range of people who work in and with the non-profit sector have proven to be equally important, especially in broadening my understanding of community contexts.

For you as a past author with the journal, please share with us your reflections, reaction, thoughts about what has changed and/or stayed the same.

[How Funders Are Supporting Social Innovation: Three Examples From The Youth Sector](#) by Arti Freeman, John Cawley and Violetta Ilkiw, 2010

As I reflected on the article I co-authored with John Cawley and Violetta Ilkiw, three main thoughts surfaced:

1. *Investing in social innovation is as important today as it was a decade ago.*

Supporting innovation in the social sector enables us to learn new ways of achieving better results. Whether we want to address challenges or emerging issues in the fields of education, poverty, health and wellness, social disintegration, or climate change, the process of innovation allows us to experiment, take risks, test our assumptions and hypothesis, and garner new evidence, in order to better meet the needs of the sector and the people we serve. While social innovation is not the only way to achieve desired impact, it is one of the ways we can support the co-creation of a new social value for communities. There are many funders that see the value of, and continue to support social innovation. At the Ontario Trillium Foundation for example, one of our granting streams is specifically dedicated to seeding new ideas and funding innovation.

2. *The process matters.*

The article reminded me about the importance of not only the product of innovation, but also the process of innovation. I once heard someone say that the quality of the process determines the quality of the outcome. This notion has also been backed up by the Interaction Institute for Social Change in what they call their [R-P-R triangle](#) which suggests that success is not just defined as results, but also by process and relationships.

As noted in the article we wrote, flexibility and adaptability to continuously learn and improve were important to the three social innovations in the youth sector. Integrating evaluation, embedding a developmental evaluator and documenting learning, as indicated in the examples, were instrumental in supporting the innovation and creating knowledge. Equally important is the intentional inclusion of diverse perspectives and ideas from various stakeholders as well as the end users themselves. In each of the three initiatives mentioned in the article, youth were co-creators of the process.

3. Articulate the strategy.

One of the questions I had, while reading the article again, relates to articulating the desired change. How do we know if the innovation was successful or not in achieving the desired change? What does success look like and how do we know if we are successful? We wanted to transform the youth sector, but what would that transformation look like? Within the examples provided, outcomes were articulated as they relate to the process and product of innovation (i.e. creating an environment for innovation, developmental evaluation, and funder collaborative partnership). While it is important to have outcomes related to the process and product of innovation, I've learned that it is also vital to articulate the desired change the innovation is driving toward. As funders and participants in creating innovative solutions to community challenges, we need to understand what will change as a result of the innovation on an individual, system, and/or population level. Articulating the change (i.e. more youth leading change initiatives in their community), as opposed to the product alone (i.e. community of practice), sets a clear direction, enables funders and other stakeholders to determine alignment with their own strategies, and further supports the process of learning and improving toward that change.

Do you know someone we should profile as part of this series? Email us at philanthropistprofiles@gmail.com