

Title: "150 Profiles: Marilyn Struthers"

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Published in: *The Philanthropist*, [150 Profiles](#)

Date: March 14, 2017

Original Link: <https://thephilanthropist.ca/2017/03/canada-150-profiles-marilyn-struthers/>

Date of PDF Download: November 22, 2017

150 Profiles: Marilyn Struthers

By Marilyn Struthers

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: Marilyn Struthers

Current role in the sector: Coach, writer, organizational consultant in my freelance company M. Struthers & Co.

Years working and/or volunteering in the non-profit sector: 45

What was your first job in the sector or your defining moment?

My first “real” job was in the 70s leading a community arts council in my rural Georgian Bay community. Once, I set out to find all of the many councils that had sprung up independently to make art more accessible in communities. I organized the first meet-up conference and the result was galvanizing. Years later when I was working as a funder, I again witnessed the sudden emergence of similar project types as people in different places spontaneously began to organize in new ways. This

was a defining moment that led me into a 20 year exploration of how complexity theories apply to social organizing.

Describe your desk/workspace.

I write and work in a plethora of clutter with projects (more or less) stacked in piles. It defies vacuuming but I thrive on multiple projects at the same time, and I like to see everything at once. I seldom lose things and I am often taken by how a common “thinking thread” emerges across very different kinds of work. Outside is Georgian Bay escarpment woodland and small birds visit in the purple sand cherry in front of my window. My other workplace is my car. I spend a lot of time commuting.

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

I am an indiscriminate and compulsive reader – in a pinch the back of a Kleenex box will do. I love new fiction – best if they are based on real life transitions, immigration, conflict and discovery. I read the [Globe](#), subscribe to the [Stanford Social Innovation Review](#) and I have set up my inbox to receive a wide range of social sector “grey lit” that carries new ideas and experience. Recently as I have been travelling less, I have taken up Facebook over my morning coffee. I love the randomness of it and the quirky blend of community, national and global news alongside my kids’ doings and the ventures of my global knitting group.

For you as a past author with the journal, please share with us your reflections on what has changed and/or stayed the same since writing the following article:

[Of Starlings and Social Change: Funding the Nonprofit Sector in Canada](#) (2012) was my last article for the Philanthropist. In it I describe the social sector as a complex adaptive system rather than as a collection of organizations doing good. As a system that every Canadian both contributes to and benefits from, it is fleeter than government and more focused on social good than corporations. This is a vital idea and invites discussion of the patterns we see emerging across the system. Up next: a look at the patterns of practice in social justice and social innovation organizing and what they might offer to each other.

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