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150 Profiles: Wendy MacDermott

By Wendy MacDermott

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: Wendy MacDermott

Current role in the sector: Executive Director, United Way serving Saint John, Kings, Charlotte



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

During my masters in Applied Social Psychology, I completed 3 practicums in Saskatoon, working both at a women's centre and with children exploited in the sex trade. These opportunities taught me that unless we understand the underlying issues, we have no chance of addressing them effectively.

Community challenges such as violence, exploitation, and poverty are complex and beyond the scope or

capacity of any one organization. I realized that if I had a hope of retaining my sanity in this space I had to work with the systems that could affect larger scale impact.

Describe your desk/workspace.

My desk is completely uncontrolled chaos but I know where everything is. I have piles of documents that all make sense to me. My laptop sits on top of my Masters thesis. I have a salt stone as my light source and am surrounded by little gifts I have received. There is a picture of the Crescent Valley community garden; there is a print on my wall from Saskatoon, and a glass and metal sculpture from Saint John.

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

I read as much as I can from Stanford Social Innovation Review. I love to get my subscription in my inbox. I leave it open, pick the article that most resonates with me, and then, like a maze, I follow links. I look up and an hour has passed and I've been inspired, challenged, and found something to emulate.

What do you think our sector needs to be thinking about?

Helping people is a gift and a privilege. As a sector, as communities, and as individuals and organizations, we need to acknowledge that some programs, ideas, and people work better than others. We are not producing widgets, and, as such our standards should be higher than the strictest of quality assurance programs. If every day we put the client at the centre of our decisions and took a systems view, I think we would design something very different than our current responses to complex issues like poverty, mental health, and family violence.

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