

## Women of Distinction 2017 Nominee Biographies

### Debby Andrews

#### BRACEBRIDGE

For twenty years, Debby Andrews advocated for people with intellectual disabilities and has been involved in social justice issues including women's rights, poverty issues and child welfare.

Debby moved to Muskoka in 1990. During that time, she struggled with the psychological and emotional effects of past childhood sexual abuse. Once in Muskoka, Debby had the great pleasure of working with Maggie Ringling, who introduced her to the social service sector. After starting treatment at the Muskoka Meeting Place in Gravenhurst, Debby was diagnosed with PTSD. She says she now functions with the aid of good drugs and after years of treatment she became more stable and the depression began to lift. This illness, however, meant the end of full time work. She acquired a whole new perspective on poverty and mental health issues.

Debby filled her days with volunteer activities. Currently she volunteers with a long list of organizations including: Manna Food Bank; Interval House, Habitat Restore, Out of the Cold, Breakfast Club and Grandmothers to Grandmothers - part of the Stephen Lewis Foundation. In the past Debby has assisted with Caregivers Voice, SAIL, Evergreen Housing Co-op, Gravenhurst Opera House, Rene Caisse Theatre and more. Debby has also found great fulfillment through singing and continues to sing with The OutLoud Womyn's Voices.

## **Norma Connolly**

### **HUNTSVILLE**

Norma Connolly's desire to be a nurse began as a young child. Today, she is team leader of the Hope Huntsville Palliative Care Team.

Norma worked to build Hope Huntsville Palliative Care Team from its inception and has shaped what it is today: a team that supports individuals and their families in Huntsville and surrounding area cope with the physical, emotional, social, psychological and spiritual concerns caused by living with a life-threatening illness. In the palliative care world, this team put Huntsville on the map.

Norma credits her passion for end of life care to a wise, experienced nurse she met at the beginning of her nursing career. Now, Norma strives to follow her role model's example and is a mentor to others. She sets an example for her team by delivering compassionate care delivered with dignity.

As a board member, Norma was involved in the establishment of the Algonquin Grace Hospice. She was also member of the operations committee, hiring and training, admission coordination and ongoing support.

Often asked how she does such sad work, Norma says, "people are dying with or without us- but with us they will die well, with their symptoms managed, supported by the team and their loved ones in the setting of their choice."

## Jo-Anne Costantino

### BRACEBRIDGE

As the Office Administrator at BMLSS, Jo-Anne Costantino's personal fulfillment is intricately entwined in her work environment. She has completely changed the way the school does business day-to-day in regards to busing, budgeting, attendance, and much more to make the lives of staff easier. These changes and new protocols she's put into place over the past few years weren't done to benefit her—she spends countless hours beyond her regular work day—but to benefit her colleagues and the students. Her colleagues say the logistics in how the school operates are all thanks to her.

Jo possesses kindness, sense of humor, energy, efficiency, empathy, always has a smile on her face (even when stressed – you'd never know it), the ability to compassionately talk to people about changes that need to be made, amazing ability to understand the big picture.

Jo has three children and three adorable grandchildren: Abigail, Eli and Solomon. As a motorcycle enthusiast, Jo has been known to step out of her role as mom and nana role when she and her husband, Gino, take to the open road!

## **Bonnie Dart**

### **GRAVENHURST**

Growing up, Bonnie Dart learned an important lesson from her parents at an early age: helping others is a given. She carried that lesson into adulthood and earned her RN degree, helping patients at Toronto General Hospital, South Muskoka Memorial Hospital and then on the administrative side at two retirement homes.

Bonnie then went on to earn her BA, BEd and MEd and began her work helping students throughout a successful 25-year teaching career with Trillium Lakelands District School Board.

While raising three children and working full-time, Bonnie still found time to volunteer in the community. Her work included being a camp nurse; charity canvasser; youth group leader; Terry Fox Run organizer; Rotarian and most recently, Syrian Refugee Committee Coordinator.

In thinking about how she has impacted others, Bonnie recognizes that a powerful connection is created when you are an important part of positive change in another person's life. It requires much from you, but at the same time, it propels you forward with this irresistible energy to accomplish all you can for them. Newly retired, Bonnie enjoys her favourite role of all: mentoring seven lucky grandchildren.

## Michelle Emson

### BRACEBRIDGE

Michelle Emson is a devout technologist, entrepreneur, human rights activist, keynote speaker, and documentary filmmaker. She advocates for the rights of LGBTQI identified people worldwide and to “End the Stigma” of mental health.

Since settling in Muskoka, Michelle has become an active part of the community advocating for LGBTQI, mental health, and female entrepreneurs, plus supporting Rotary and the performing arts.

Her business, Sanctuary Studios, is a Muskoka based social enterprise that provides web design & digital marketing service to its clients, supports her human rights activism and documentary filmmaking, and seeks to employ talented trans\* identified people unable to secure employment due to discrimination, fear, and prejudice.

Michelle was selected as a finalist for the prestigious, national, 2017 Mompreneurs® Momentum Award for her entrepreneurship and human rights work.

She is committed to the concept that each and every one of us can live a fulfilling and meaningful life if we only come to truly accept our own, authentic, uniqueness and hence, come to accept the uniqueness of others.

## Heather Hay

### **GRAVENHURST**

Heather Hay spent 20 years building networks and teaching in communities throughout the Northwest Territories and Nunavut with a focus on promoting trade and technical skills for high school students. After she returned to Muskoka, Heather became Chair of Muskoka Pride. She was instrumental in getting all Muskoka municipalities to raise the Pride Flag during Pride Week and organized the first Annual Pride Conferences in Muskoka which brought speakers and much-needed information to the LGBT community, service providers and the wider community as well as reaching out to high school students

Her work with Muskoka Pride led her to become engaged at the national level where she is now the Chair of Fierté Canada Pride Week in Montreal. She also set up a non-profit organization that will support the work of artists from marginalized groups. Heather also assisted the establishment of PFLAG in Muskoka, which acts as a resource on gender issues to families, GSAs and professionals.

Her commitment to a poverty free and age friendly Muskoka is reflected in her work with Lake County Community Legal Clinic and Elder Abuse Prevention Muskoka, where she gives workshops, writes a column for the local newspaper and carries the Elder Abuse Prevention hotline phone.

Heather acts as administrative assistant for League for Ontario Foster Families (LOFF), where she organizes their annual conference that provides training and support to foster parents from across the province.

This past year, Heather volunteered to move out of her home so a Syrian refugee family would have accommodations. She not only made the family feel welcome, but offered rides into town and occasional childcare during the two months the family lived there.

## Joanne Lea

### HUNTSVILLE

Two strong women inspired Joanne Lea – her grandmothers. Their stories instilled Joanne’s respect for the past and her determination to envision and work for a better future.

As an archaeologist, Joanne has worked on provincial, national and international heritage committees, published research, and worked in museums.

As a teacher and professor in Muskoka, in Canada and internationally, Joanne has written and advised on curriculum, trained teachers and led student government and social justice committees.

What makes her contributions unique is how she involves her students and peers in these endeavours, helping them to become involved in the world around them. Two major examples include her creation of the Student Summit around the G8 and her efforts to mobilize staff and students in relief efforts for Haiti. She also travelled directly to Haiti to help create a school and after her experience, shared photos and stories with her students to help them understand the depth at which one can affect change.

Her students cook, fundraise, sew costumes for plays, go on archaeological digs, hold a mock Confederation Conference, run a Winter Carnival, plant a garden, organize a film festival, and the list goes on. As one student stated: “I didn’t realize who I was until I had Madelle Lea as a teacher.”

In addition, Joanne established a women’s sewing cooperative for Haiti Education and Resource Team (HEART) and served as ESL Coordinator for Syrian Refugee Sponsorship Huntsville.

## Nicole Manion

### BRACEBRIDGE

At the age of 21, Nicole Manion established her salon – a salon that promotes more than physical appearance, but also beauty from within. Today, she mentors four employees and has become an inspiration to Muskoka youth through motivational speeches to local elementary and high school students to help build a more confident, smart and capable future generation.

Inspired by her entrepreneurial parents, Nicole established her own business, “At Your Service” at the early age of 17, providing everything from housecleaning to pet day care services for residents. Her parents encouraged Nicole to trust her instincts and reach outside her comfort zone.

In 2011 Nicole did just that. At the urging of her friends – who felt Nicole represented true Muskoka: an outdoors type who hikes, fishes and snowmobiles, is a licensed chainsaw operator and athlete – she entered the Miss Muskoka contest, hoping simply to bring attention to her belief that anyone can be anything. She was quickly nominated to participate in the Miss North Ontario Regional Canada Pageant and ultimately selected to represent North Ontario in the Miss Canada Universe Pageant. Her motivation to participate stemmed from the funds she could raise as a competitor; She raised \$35 thousand dollars in support of Northern Ontario Families of Children with Cancer.

An award winning athlete, Nicole continues to bring her talent to the youth in Muskoka. She has mentored younger high school teams and sponsors her own baseball team. She also sponsors hospices and women’s shelters.

At her business, ‘Muskoka Aesthetics’, Nicole’s approach to aesthetics is not to make the outside look better, but to bring the inner beauty to the surface. She offers her time to projects like the ‘Wax-a-Thon’, luring unsuspecting but cheerful men in to having their chests waxed for charity. She supports the Little Sister’s organization by teaching age appropriate make-up skills and skin treatments.



## **Kathleen May**

### **HUNTSVILLE**

Inspired by feminist authors and activists, Kathleen May has run a popular feminist blog for more than 8 years. She works for Muskoka Women's Advocacy Group, beginning as a volunteer. Her activism strengthened her voice – and many women's voices – in Huntsville, where she hosted a Women's Strike! on International Women's Day of this year, inspired by attending the Women's March on Washington.

Kathleen volunteers with Muskoka Parry Sound Sexual Assault Services as a survivor mentor and crisis line volunteer. Kathleen also co-founded the popular Huntsville Women's Group in 2014: a free, volunteer-run weekly drop-in for all Muskoka women.

Kathleen finds joy in nature, writing, and her community. She will be releasing her women-focused creative fiction and has found a new outlet making feminist videos on YouTube. Her energy comes from creating safe spaces for women to share their stories. Kathleen's vision is to create a sustainable women's land co-operative in Huntsville.

## **Julia McCreadie**

### **BRACEBRIDGE**

Julia McCreadie is passionate about promoting health and wellness in her professional and personal life. Growing up, her parents and a few special teachers influenced Julia's involvement in sports and recreation which paved the way to her overall outlook on life and the importance of healthy active living.

As a teen she moved frequently, living in Ontario, B.C. and Alberta. This was challenging, but Julia found a sense of belonging and balance through sports is where she found her balance.

As an educator for the last 14 years, Julia works with teens in physical education classes, health science classes and within practical academics setting; she feels strongly about inclusion and healthy active pursuits for all.

She brought Special Olympics – a movement, bringing community programs and competition opportunities to people with intellectual – to high school students in Muskoka and the BMLSS community.

Julia coaches a variety of sports teams which contributes to positive school culture. Every day she works to promote physical literacy, breaks down walls of judgment and builds positive relationships.

## **Jacki McPherson**

### **GRAVENHURST**

As an English teacher and Head of Languages at Gravenhurst High School, Jacki McPherson inspires a future generation of thoughtful and engaged leaders by creating opportunities that allow students and community members to experience the connection, support and enjoyment that comes from community-building.

She is a Heroes in the Hallway Coach- a social justice and community building group at GHS that organizes a variety of events to connect students with the broader community, build teamwork, fundraising events and initiatives to help students learn about self-care and how to support the mental health of others.

Through mentorship, Jacki helps students understand the value of studying one's own community. Her students take on a research project through StAR (Students As Researchers Team), which is then published and presented at the Ministry of Education's Students As Researchers Symposium.

Jacki currently Chairs Gravenhurst Parents for French and GHS Here To Stay. She coaches t-ball, volunteers at the Gravenhurst Winter Carnival, and created Gravenhurst Swap & Play, which supports and connects new parents and young families in the community. She is also a past Chair of the Friends of Muskoka Midwives foundation.

## Christine Moore

### BRACEBRIDGE

Co-operative education, Physical Education teacher and volleyball coach at Bracebridge and Muskoka Lakes Secondary School, Christine Moore has been working to inspire people to be healthy and happy for many years. She has shared her coaching expertise working with many successful high school teams for the past 20 years, and has taken teens on international volleyball trips abroad. In addition, she volunteers her time to teach elementary aged school children as part of the Muskoka Youth Volleyball initiative and organizes an adult recreational league.

As a Physical Education teacher, Christine has always encouraged teens to develop a positive self-concept in her informative health classes by using honesty and humor to help students to learn to live healthy lives. As a co-operative education teacher, Christine has significantly increased opportunities for apprenticeships for her students, helping them succeed in the workplace, improve self-confidence and pave the path for their future careers.

## **Dawn Novak**

### **UTTERSON**

Dawn Novak spent over thirty years as a special education teacher working with special needs children. On May 15, 2006 her life changed forever: her daughter, Natalie, was brutally murdered by an ex boyfriend.

In an effort to understand what had happened to Natalie, Dawn spent two years tracing the interactions various support agencies had with Natalie and her killer. The document 'A Constructive Analysis of the Murder of Natalie Novak' was published and presented to the Ontario Legislature. The document has been presented throughout Ontario to many support agencies. It is now being used in new policing courses at Wilfred Laurier University and the police colleges in Aylmer and Orillia.

Dawn has made domestic violence advocacy her mission. She established the 'Natalie Novak Fund for the Education and Prevention of Relationship Violence' and spearheaded an educational video called: 'If Only: Nat's story'. She has presented this video to tens of thousands of students throughout Ontario as well as to police, corrections services, victims and other agencies.

In 2013 Dawn was awarded the Ontario Attorney General's Victim Services Award of Distinction.

Currently she is involved in presenting at OPP courses and continues to present to high schools throughout the province. Dawn also serves as the chair of the Muskoka Victims Services Board.

## Marilyn Parsons

### DWIGHT

Marilyn Parsons' father, one of the great influences in her life, was an excellent swimmer and sportsman. So it was no surprise that Marilyn also developed a love for the water and went on to help others through her work as a swimming coach.

While growing up in Scarborough, Marilyn was encouraged through the sport of swimming. It helped her gain confidence and overcome shyness. As a teenager, Marilyn volunteered at the SickKids hospital assisting children who had polio, multiple sclerosis or cerebral palsy in the swimming pool. She earned her Red Cross Instructor's certificate in 1955, and a Royal Lifesaving Instructor certificate from the YWCA.

When Marilyn moved to Dwight in 1974 with her husband and two young children, she discovered there was no opportunity for children to learn to swim. She started the Dwight Lions Swim School in 1975 and continued with it until 1995. She also became an instructor at Huntsville's first indoor pool in 1987.

For over forty years, Marilyn's work has helped others – of all ages – gain confidence and become safe, proficient and fit, with improved mobility through swim and aquacise classes.

## **Debra Pringle**

### **BRACEBRIDGE**

In pursuit of finding balance Debbie Pringle stepped out of her 22 year policing career and into the role of Social Services Worker and Educator. Throughout her journey, however, she always carries with her the oath she took in 1995 to serve and protect.

In her role as a Student Services Worker Debbie works tirelessly to afford every child she encounters the best possible opportunity to reach their full potential. She supports numerous students through counselling and by connecting students to external counsellors, and mental health supports. Her work continues well beyond the school day; she will even go to a student's home to support if necessary and will even go to the hospital with a student if a parent/guardian is not able to be there.

With the understanding that not all students have a "straight path" through high school and that some students have more complicated lives that make concentrating on school difficult, Deb works to ensure students are in the right environment to learn and be successful. She has also helped many students who were struggling in main stream schools transition to alternate programs where they have thrived. With Debbie's support, many students have attained their high school diploma.

## Danielle Ryan

### GRAVENHURST

In addition to her day job in Municipal Administration, Danielle Ryan is the Founder and Content Creator at *Danielle Does Adult*; an online resource developed to inspire other millennials to find their purpose and motivation to live the lives that they have always wanted.

Danielle provides weekly workshops in the form of a free podcast and blog with step-by-step guidance on a variety of life skills from Goal Setting, to Health, to Finance, and more. Her goal is to provide direction to her generation – a generation that is overstimulated with access to an abundance of information.

Danielle recently joined the ranks as one of newest recruits of the Gravenhurst Fire Department where she seeks to continue to contribute to the wellbeing of her community. She is a firm believer that the quality of your life is yours to create, and hopes to lead other young women by example in achieving this in their own lives.



## **Maggie West**

### **HUNTSVILLE**

Born in a small village outside Trois Rivieres, Quebec, Maggie West is the eldest of 11 children. She moved to Blind River, Ontario at the age of 3 and graduated high school at age 16. At 17, Maggie left home to be a nanny to two children in Huntsville, Ontario. She fell in love with the area, had one son and has been in Muskoka since 1973.

Throughout these years, Maggie has looked after children and the elderly through a variety of different roles. In 2005, Maggie was hired by the Alcock/Hunter family as a part-time caregiver/cook for their father who was no longer able to care for himself. What was quickly apparent was her tremendous depth in palliative care.

Over the next ten years, Maggie was a constant presence at the Alcock/Hunter home, the long-term care facilities and the hospital, where she cared for not only their father, but also their mother and aunts.

Today, Maggie has 17 clients. She inherently knows what needs to be done and promotes the adaptation of housing to allow an elderly person to stay at home and do as much as they can on their own. She works with families to ensure the right supports are in place. The support she provides includes: chauffeuring, organizing outings, cooking, care-giving, nursing, protecting, shopping, administering, listening and teaching – all done with much love and support.

Outside of her daily employment responsibilities, Maggie has volunteered at Muskoka Landing, Heart and Stroke, Kidney Foundation, St. Mary's Catholic Church, and recently received her 10-year pin in recognition of her work with hospice.

## Linda Williams

### GRAVENHURST

Years ago, as a widow, Linda Williams was the sole source of support her two children, while running a foster parent home and training wild horses for income. That Christmas, Linda wanted to ensure her children had all the Christmas traditions they were used to, which included a real Christmas tree. Linda climbed to the top of a tall pine, but lost her footing, fell and broke her back. She was told there was a 90 per cent chance she would never walk again. With determination and countless hours of therapy, Linda beat those odds and, after six months, she was walking again.

Today, she not only walks, she runs. With new found energy, Linda volunteers thousands of hours with the Muskoka Chapter of Therapeutic Paws of Canada – a group that brings dog therapy to seniors, schools, libraries, camps, hospitals and hospice. As the Team Leader, Linda has reinvigorated and saved the program from closing by increasing the number of TPOC volunteers by 74 per cent in the last two years – now the largest team in Canada. Linda also arranged Canine First Aid training so that all therapy animals are receiving the best quality of care from their handlers.

Beyond TPOC, Linda donates free dog training sessions to anyone who adopts a dog from a local Muskoka animal rescue organization to increase the likelihood of a successful permanent rehoming of animals. Her additional volunteer experience includes: Muskoka Kennel Club; Muskoka branch of the OSPCA; a foster parent for children with exceptional needs and challenges with the Simcoe County Children's Aid Society; Co-Founder of the Orillia Chapter of Special Olympics; Board Member with the International Peace Games.

## **Brenda Wood**

### **HUNTSVILLE**

For a long time, Brenda Wood felt isolated. She felt people could only see her for her disability. It was when Brenda moved to Huntsville, with the help of her aunt, that she began to feel included in the broader community and gain a sense of independence.

Brenda became involved in Community Living Huntsville and, though she was scared at first, decided to move out to a place she could call her own. At 48 years old, Brenda moved into an apartment with a roommate – at 48 years old, she finally had her own bedroom for the very first time.

Through the Supported Independent Living Program, Brenda received help with cooking, cleaning and handling her money. She eventually got her own apartment, where she now lives with her cat, Sassy, and her fish. She loves living on her own, having her own space and being her own boss.

With the assistance of Community Living, Brenda obtained hearing aids, which allowed her to hear properly for the first time. This opened the door to new friendships because now she could better communicate with other people. Brenda also had eye surgery to improve her vision and received proper care to help her walk without pain.

Brenda started her own business, “Brenda’s Critter Care” and became busy working each day: “I was so proud of myself and the strong woman I had become. I was living on my own for the first time, I had a job, I made my own choices, what I want to do, when I want to do it.”

Brenda now works at Boston Pizza. She honed her skills and met new people through the YWCA’s “Business of Life” program. In the summer, Brenda plays on a golf team and belongs to a gardening group that donates all its produce to the hospital patients. Brenda also volunteers at Table Food Bank where she sorts clothes and gives back to the community.

No longer isolated, Brenda has found her own strength in the community. People now see her for who she is: a strong, independent, giving person who makes Huntsville a better place to live.

## **Candace Yule**

### **GRAVENHURST**

Ever since she can remember, Candace Yule wanted to be a teacher. Growing up, several teachers inspired her beyond the walls of the classroom and now she's doing the same for her own students as a second language teacher at Gravenhurst High School. Her goal is to expose students to hands-on, relatable and meaningful experiences to inspire and challenge them.

Candace's enthusiasm and engagement ensure her students feel comfortable taking risks; her lessons allow students to see themselves reflected in their curriculum, their physical surroundings, and the broader environment in which they live.

In 2016, Candace tutored the daughter of a young refugee family from Syria and helped involve the student within the broader school community and the Town of Gravenhurst. She connected with the entire family on a person level, even sharing lunches at the Farmer's Market.

Her volunteer experience includes the coordination of many sport and leadership events for students. She was also a Field Trip Mentor for Environmental Earth Angels where she exposed students to forest, wetland and meadow ecosystems.