

The Philosopher Queen

Getting to know Barb Stegemann

BY DARCY RHYNO

Not only was Barb Stegemann the first Atlantic Canadian woman to land a deal on CBC's *Dragon's Den*, it named her "Top Game Changer" in the history of the show. Since then, many more honours have come her way, including *Top 100 Most Powerful Women in Canada*, *Women's Innovator of the Year Award* from the US State Department and an *Honourary Doctorate* from UNB. Stegemann is the author of *The 7 Virtues of a Philosopher Queen* and the founder and CEO of *The 7 Virtues Beauty Inc.*, a fair-trade company in Halifax that makes fragrances with ingredients from nations like Afghanistan and Haiti as they rebuild. In January, she heads to Puerto Rico with the Clinton Foundation for that purpose. *Saltscapes* spoke with Barb Stegemann about kind neighbours, ugly ducklings and hot air balloons.

Why did your family move from Quebec to Antigonish when you were eight?

Mom had family there. She was from Cape Breton. Dad had a business that didn't work. He went out west to work on the rigs, and then he left. We found ourselves living on welfare in a trailer in Antigonish. It was humbling.

How did you get by?

We had cousins who were like brothers and sisters. There was always a neighbour with a root cellar, a cow or garden. We had 4-H, church, incredible teachers and mentors. We didn't need money

to have a very exciting childhood. It's the makings of a strong future, if you see all the gifts in that.

What was school like?

Being obese and on welfare, kids are going to pick on you. When you're the ugly duckling, you're not the homecoming queen, but you're going to work really hard on your talents. When you blossom into a swan, you're this humble, grateful person who values their mind and soul over everything else.

It sounds like you consider yourself lucky.

I don't take anything for granted. I'm very grateful, in awe every day that a wonderful opportunity came my way. I'm still the kid from the trailer excited she got a red ribbon.

How did *The 7 Virtues* book and fragrance line come about?

I was living in BC and getting asked to speak on economic development. I wanted to write a book to empower women to be braver in business and government. Then my best friend, Captain Trevor Greene, was axed in the head by Taliban in Afghanistan. That was a pivotal moment in our lives. I promised him I would take on his mission of peace, but I didn't have a way. Then it dawned on me—women

have buying and voting power. What if we harnessed that power to create policy and businesses that would reverse cycles of war and poverty? I could take on my best friend's mission.

How long did that take?

Two years. Every morning I got up at 4:30 and wrote until 7:30 when I got the kids ready for school. I dedicated it to Trevor and launched it on International Women's Day. Then I read about this gentleman in Afghanistan growing orange blossoms and roses. This was the thesis to my book: that women have the buying power to buy oils from farmers so the Taliban don't force them to grow illegal poppies for the heroin trade.

Of your many awards, which means most to you?

Being made the first female Honourary colonel in the history of 14 Wing Greenwood was quite an honour. Prime Minister Borden set that up for men of means to guide the military, and here's a scrappy girl from welfare being asked.

People find the story of your life inspiring. How do you think of it?

Like a hot air balloon, bumping along the ground for years. Now, I'm finally going up and the view is lovely up here. There are endless possibilities for creating beauty where there's suffering. 



MATT BARNES