



*Great Leaders  
Great Organizations  
Lasting Results*

## *Interview with Extraordinary Atlantic Canadian Leader Dianne Swinemar*

*Special Christmas Edition on the Spirit of Giving*



Before she retired as executive director in 2014, the name Dianne Swinemar was synonymous with the Food Bank of Nova Scotia.

**B.M.** What was the Food Bank like when you started 22 years ago and how did you decide which goals to pursue?

**D.S.** Previously there were a number of small local food banks. In 1984 they were consolidated into the Metro Food Bank, which became FEED Nova Scotia in 2005. I was on the board and in 1991 they offered me the job as executive director three times and I turned it down three times. Eventually they talked me into taking the job with a great deal of fear and trepidation. My saving grace was that the food bank only had a mandate to remain open until 1994 as the economy was expected to improve.

However, after the Free Trade Agreement there was a big dip in the local economy – businesses were closing or relocating out of Halifax and Dartmouth with hundreds of people losing their jobs. The provincial government did what it could and we looked at what would happen if the food bank were to close and what would happen to families in need. So the food bank was given another mandate to stay open.

Another critical consideration was that the building we were in had 17 building safety citations and was a bit of a death trap. There were bars on the window in my office, and worst of all, the door to my office had a lock on the outside, so I could have been locked in. My desk was a table and a lawn chair and most importantly, there was not enough room to store the food.

The reason we consolidated the number of small local food banks and all of the soup kitchens was because each facility did their own fundraising and consequently were often tripping over each other. In addition, each organization only had limited resources in terms of food raising and fundraising. So we decided to all work together under one umbrella and that's how the Metro Food Bank came into being. This also allowed all of us to use our resources more effectively and increase our food and fundraising at a significantly lower overall cost. A large part of my job was to concentrate on marketing and fundraising.

**B.M.** How did you learn to be a social entrepreneurial?

**D.S.** Originally I started to help with fundraising at a local elementary school, but I actually didn't do fundraising per se. It was a community school and there was a lot of vandalism, there was no gym, no library, and a lot of latch key kids. The first thing I did was talk a company into loaning us a microwave oven, which were new and very expensive at that time. We offered training to adults in microwave cooking and taught kids how to use it to heat up a meal. At the end of the year we were able to pay for the microwave. We also sourced books for a library, organized an aerobic class and developed computer classes. It was exciting and innovative because no one told us what we could and couldn't do.

The parents were not very involved and too many children came to school hungry and sometimes would ask me for food and I found this very distressing. It raised my awareness that something had to be done, but at the time I never had any idea of the direction that would take me in.

We also had curriculum nights, but very few parents came. The word curriculum didn't resonate with these parents because they didn't have good school experiences. So we organized a very different type of event in which the teachers had to be in their classrooms but their jobs were not to sit at a little desk with the parents sitting on little chairs across from them. Instead, the teacher's job was to mingle. Each child was asked to bring an adult and we did crafts starting with the primary classes. The parents could mingle with the teachers, so we were able to engage the parents in a different way. By the time we did this with the Grade Sixes we had 90% participation rate with the parents. All

of these initiatives changed the relationship the school had with its community and vandalism decreased significantly.

There were a number of cases where we tried to help families that were struggling. We had one mother who was separated from her husband, she didn't have a job and was on social assistance, plus she didn't have anyone who could look after her children after school if she did work. So we got the mom a job as the receptionist at the school. She had some of the skills that were needed and others that were upgraded and she learned on the job. She didn't have child care and so her children could stay with her after school while she worked. She was in a much happier place and we all learned that anything is possible. All you need to do is ask people to help you, and they can say yes or no.

**B.M.** What experiences earlier in your life helped you become the person you are?

**D.M.** Due to circumstances beyond my family's control, I had to drop out of high school and live in a boarding house. I started working for Maritime Medical Care and my first job was that of a file retriever for files that had been misplaced. I was always a high achiever and wanted to prove that I could get things done and done well and was promoted in three months. Maritime Medical Care was very good to me. They saw something in me and sent me on a lot of management training programs. Eventually they gave me the job of being in charge of inquiries. I was 27 years-old and there were 19 people who reported to me and every one of them was older than I was. It was a great progressive company, invested in its employees and I try to emulate that.

Even though I had to drop out of high school I ended up with a master's degree in management and leadership in the volunteer sector from McGill University. I put my name in. I was positive I wouldn't be accepted, but somehow I got in. It was breathtaking and I could not believe how much I learned.

**B.M.** You were tremendously good at obtaining resources and donations for the food bank. Can you tell me how you were able to accomplish so much?

**D.M.** We looked for best practices we could model and not try to piggy back on what other organizations were doing. It had to be creative and original. One of our most unique and ideas was to use cans of food in our Canstruction® contest, where teams compete by building imaginative structures from thousands of cans of food. In addition to an extraordinary public display of talent and a lot of fun, the event raised over 25,000 cans of food!" The designs keep getting more elaborate each year. You can see some of the amazing robots, architecturally designed buildings, such as the Roman Coliseum at <http://feednovascotia.ca/canstruction/pastevents.html>.

**B.M.** Who are your role models?

**D.S.** The first person that comes to mind is Ruth Goldbloom. She was the ideal role model for me. I heard Ruth speak when she was the President of the United Way. Ruth

was always able to see the big picture and saw the value of getting everyone involved. Not many people could carry out what she carried out.

**B.M.** How did you make the decision to leave the food bank?

**D.S.** I did not want to out last my stay beyond being useful and I knew I would know when it was time to go. When we came through Christmas in 2013, I realized I was extremely tired and it was clear to me that I wanted and needed to retire. I gave the board 16 months notice so we could plan for as successful a transition as possible. When I said it out loud, I knew it was the right decision. Many organizations and their boards don't spend enough time planning for succession, both in preparing the organization for the change and finding the right person.

**B.M.** What will you miss most about working at the food bank?

**D.S.** The thing I will miss most about working at Feed Nova Scotia is leaving our 'extended family'. Working at the food bank can be a really tough, intensive, multi-faceted business because we are always trying to reach our targets. Christmas is the most emotional and taxing time of year for Feed Nova Scotia. After the holidays were over, we wanted to thank our many volunteers, so we had a potluck dinner for 200 and it was a wonderful and well deserved event.

**B.M.** What's next for Dianne Swinemar?

**D.S.** I very much want to help organizations connected with hunger and poverty – especially children. Children are hungry because they are in an economic situation that they can't help – we need to get food into their homes. When I left, I felt very honoured when Feed Nova Scotia established a legacy fund in my name.

During her 22 years of hard work, Dianne, like her role model Ruth Goldbloom, became a role model of how to do things right by accomplishing so much for Feed Nova Scotia in particular and the volunteer sector in general. At the end of our interview, Dianne summed up her life and her passion with the following words, "*In the hallway of life you never know which door is going to open up for you.*" Few people have lived those words more thoroughly than Dianne Swinemar, and for that, we all can be thankful.

If you have any Extraordinary Leaders that you would like to see interviewed in this series, please contact [Brad@BradMcRae.com](mailto:Brad@BradMcRae.com)

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