

Welcome to the club

Mary Aitken took on the Bay Street boys and earned the Order of Canada

BY ROSALIND STEFANC

MARY AITKEN has spent enough time in boardrooms over the years to realize she's usually going to be the only woman at the bargaining table. In raising capital to fuel numerous business ventures throughout her career, she also knows the kind of networks needed to make lucrative deals happen outside the boardroom, too, and, unfortunately, women have rarely been part of them.

In an effort to bridge the gender gap Aitken saw in business, and to create something of "real social value," she founded Canada's very first 'boys' club' geared to women. "Since the 18th century, men

have been going to their clubs and doing deals to raise money... we needed a network, too, that could fulfil a number of things under one roof given the shortage of time that we women have in our days," she says. "It needed to be a diverse group, because I didn't want fancy ladies who lunch, or just lawyers and investment bankers."

That club, Verity, 18 years later, has some 800 members from all age groups and business sectors. And its founder was recently appointed to an even more exclusive club: the Order of Canada. "I was shocked and really humbled," Aitken says about getting the call from Rideau Hall in December. "It's validation of 20 years of what we've done at Verity."

Aitken says the Toronto club "really is a community of women who support each other." To that end, she initiated a program for low-income women and children from the nearby Regent Park area that lasted for eight years until gentrification started changing the neighbourhood. "Right next door to us were people with severe financial disabilities, so we worked with the mothers and brought their children here to talk to members and use our facilities," she says. "We still keep in touch."

Verity members, who pay a scaling initial membership fee depending on age, plus annual fees

of \$3,000, have the use of 58,000 square feet of amenities, including meeting rooms, co-working spaces, private dining, a fitness area, pool and yoga studio. Plus, there's Verity's three other businesses: a full-service spa, four-room boutique hotel and an open-to-the-public fine-dining restaurant called George, which in 2019 was named one of the top 100 in Canada, according to Open Table diners. "I wanted George to be a first-class restaurant that members could bring clients to," Aitken says. "It shows us in a better light than if all we had was a little salad bar."

Also with membership comes access to programs such as MasterMind (an intensive 10-month development program akin to having your own personal board of directors), along with social events like Book Club, networking breakfasts and a speaker series. "We have CEOs of hospitals and banks here and then there are the women in their 30s just starting to figure things out," Aitken says. "I wanted this to be a real sharing of ideas and solutions to problems, both business and personal."

Verity is Aitken's sixth startup venture, so the serial entrepreneur is clearly accustomed to making things happen. Originally from England, where she began her career in London's financial sector, she took a leap into business ownership while living in Toronto as a

single mother of two young boys. Already renting out apartments in her house to make ends meet, she started a local courier company called Pronto Toronto after convincing one of her tenants, then working with a national courier, to join her. It grew to 120 employees and eventually expanded to Ottawa and Montreal before they sold it four years later.

Aitken returned to the financial sector, but after acquiring enough capital, she started looking for the right space to launch her dream women's club. She even got 150 women to sign up, sight unseen, at \$6,500 a pop. "It was blind trust, and I was the trustee," she says. "We started to build, and the rest is history."

Aitken admits COVID-19 hasn't been great for business. The hotel and restaurant are closed (except for takeout), and even those who were coming into the facilities to co-work are now staying home. She's been discounting one-time membership fees by half in an effort to fill the gaps left by those taking a hiatus due to financial setbacks. "But we are going to make it," she says, noting that membership inquiries are still coming in and she expects most of those on hold to come back. "I don't know what's coming down the line, but I think now more than ever, community is just critically important." **FPM**

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A new fight

Former NHL enforcer Daniel Carcillo has a different target in mind these days

BY ANDY HOLLOWAY

IT DOESN'T TAKE Daniel Carcillo long to drop the gloves, metaphorically speaking. "I'm

a no-bullshit type of person," says the former NHLer and now CEO of Wesana Health, a