

In September 2021, the BCPVPA was fortunate to have three amazing women join us for a panel discussion on Resilient Women Thriving in Leadership: Dr. Robyne Hanley-Dafoe, a psychology and education instructor who specializes in resiliency, navigating stress and change, leadership, and personal wellness in the workplace; Paula Gosal, a middle school Principal who is completing her Education Doctorate; and Carleen Thomas, an Indigenous leader who is the Special Projects Manager of Treaty Lands & Resource Dept. for the Tsleil-Waututh Nation.

Nearly 60% of BCPVPA members are women, and 162 of them joined us for an evening of learning and connecting. Events like Leading the Way are important opportunities to hear the experiences of diverse women leaders, to network with other professionals, and to make visible how women lead.

Robyne so beautifully named the characteristics of women's experiences, and gave practical ideas on how to braid self-care strategies into our everyday. Paula brilliantly shared her family narrative with women in the lead roles as resilient, tenacious, and gracious role models. Carleen grounded us in the importance of identity, voice, and the responsibility of leading for ourselves and the generations to come.

The narratives of these three women continue to guide our thoughts many months later, and we are honoured to share just some of their words here.

LEADING THE WAY: Women in Leadership

In the words of
**Dr. Robyne Hanley-Dafoe,
Paula Gosal, and Carleen Thomas**

Foreword and afterword
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Photo courtesy Alejandro Tocomal_unsplash.com

EVERYDAY RESILIENCY IN TIMES OF UNCERTAINTY

by Dr. Robyne Hanley-Dafoe

The global landscape is ever-changing. Times of unparalleled stress, unrest, and uncertainty are becoming more common. Our physical, emotional, and mental health are being tested and taxed every day. There is an extraordinary need to build, foster, and practice resilience so we can navigate our lives.

I appreciate that it can be frustrating to be told we need to be resilient. It can also be frustrating to hear people tell you how resilient you are! Maybe we don't want to be resilient anymore. Perhaps we want to live and work in systems that don't create enormous amounts of stress and distress! I get that too. I appreciate that just because you are carrying it well, that doesn't mean it is not heavy. My invitation here is to share with you a kinder approach. Let us reframe our thinking of resiliency as getting stronger, tougher, grittier, or being less impacted by emotions and experiences. Let's think about resiliency as being able to be okay. I can assure you: okay is enough! My model for this is Everyday Resiliency. It is made up of five core competencies that support people's capacity for resiliency: Belonging, Perspective, Acceptance, Hope, and Humour. Together these five pillars build the foundation for us to weather any storm in our lives.

My belief that I can do hard things has transformed my life. I take pride in knowing that my personal struggles have played the most significant role in helping me find my purpose. I believe that each and every one of us is capable of doing extraordinary things when we are called upon. We are well

equipped to navigate whatever comes our way. We adapt. We learn. We are all doing the best that we can with the tools and knowledge that we have at the time. I believe deeply that our truest self is revealed in the soft whispers of our heart that say, come what may, we will be okay.

It is not the loud voices in our heads that help us through hard times. It is that tender and sweet, soulful recognition that we are capable and worthy of being here and of being well. You see it when you are feeling empty, yet you still make breakfast for your child, or when you think you cannot take one more appointment or treatment, yet you do it anyway. It is when you cannot imagine having the energy to make it upstairs, but you take that first step because deep down, you know you can. These moments shape our authentic capacity to be resilient. It is work. It can be heart work. And it will be hard. There is no shame in asking for help. Some lessons and insights can only be learned in a community. Take what you need to be well unapologetically, and trust that you can do hard things. Be sure to take care of yourself DURING the change seasons, not only when it is over. Burnout is the curse of the strong. Only those who care deeply will serve until they are fully depleted. Please recognize that those who care about you need you to take care of you too. Be open to receiving. I know it is hard, but thankfully you can do hard things. You can also do great things. Taking care of yourself while serving may seem like an insurmountable obstacle; it will be, until we all start doing it.

A STORY OF LOVE AND HONOUR

by Paula Gosal



As a school leader for 15 years, I know I am resilient, and I am thriving. However, my journey as a resilient woman leader does not begin with me; rather, it begins with the women who came before me and raised me – my grandmother and my mother. I understand myself better when I consider the stories of these strong women who achieved personal success despite adverse conditions.

My grandmother was born in 1910 and educated during the British Raj in India. My grandmother was fortunate to attend school up until grade 5 – this seems to be the grade level at which most young girls were withdrawn from school, and it coincides with the onset of puberty and menstruation. While she no longer attended school, she still had a love for learning. After her arranged marriage to an Indian Army soldier, she moved 120 kms to the home of her in-laws. Her first born child was a girl, and she was forced to give up her daughter to her own parents as her in-laws did not accept the baby girl. She then had two boys, one of whom died from pneumonia at

age three. And then my mother was born. Life was good until my grandmother was widowed at the age of 29, banished from her marital home, and left to raise two children without the support or assistance of extended family. She strongly valued education and she knew that had she been illiterate, like many of the females in her village, she may not have been able to overcome the many hurdles she faced as single parent.

My uncle left India for Australia in 1957, leaving my grandmother and my mother behind. Together, my grandmother and my mother faced the many hurdles that two women living alone in a rural village may face. However, with education as a key to personal growth and future possibilities, my mother pursued her goal of becoming a teacher. She then met and married my father and, just before the birth of my second brother, my dad left for Australia with the hope for a better life for his family. This left my pregnant mother, my 11-month-old brother, and my grandmother again without a male presence. Four years later, my grandmother, mother, and two brothers left India. My grandmother headed to Australia to be with her eldest daughter, and her son, and my mother and brothers joined my father in Vancouver.

Upon arrival in Canada, my mother realised she was unable to pursue her career as a teacher; as a new immigrant, her priority was providing food and shelter for the family. Both my mother and father took any available jobs so that they could lay the foundation for their life in Canada; this meant that they often worked two or more jobs at the same time. In 1974, my pregnant mother called upon my grandmother in Australia to ask her

to come and help with the baby they were expecting. My mother returned to working two different jobs when I was just two weeks old, and my grandmother became the primary caregiver for my siblings and me.

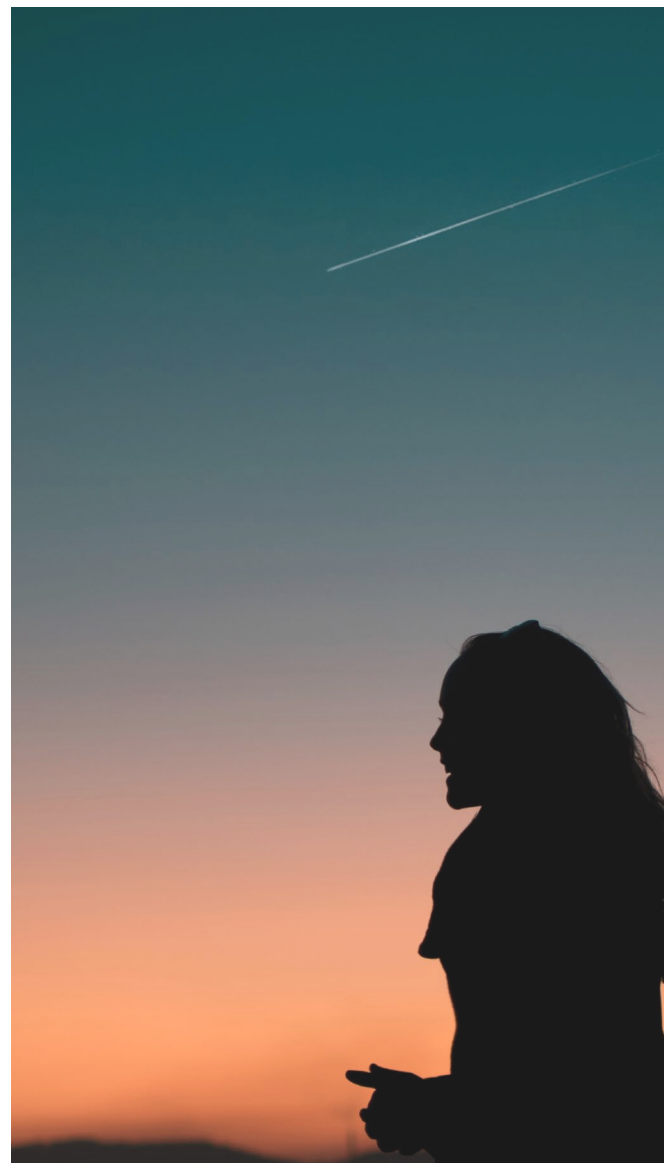
Throughout my life, the stories that my mother and grandmother told of their lives in India were shared with pride, and showcased their strength, integrity, and grace. Their reflection on the hurdles they had faced spoke to the strength they possessed, and the support they provided each other. Recently, when I asked my mother about her days in India and how she recalls my grandmother, she said, “She loved us so much, she was committed to us, we were her world”. I share the same recollection of my grandmother and my mother. When I asked my mother about living without the support of extended family and whether they were poor, my mother thought deeply and responded, “No, we weren’t poor. We had everything we needed. We had a cow for milk. We had good food, good clothes”. From this, I understand that what little they had was enough because they had an abundance of love and, with each other, a sense of security.

Facing forward, and looking for opportunities through the hurdles, defines the optimism and courage that both my grandmother and my mother possessed. And in supporting each other, they also found the time and space to take care of those around them and create networks of support.

As the youngest child and only daughter, I am proud to have been raised by such strong and resilient women. I am fortunate that I have been able to live a life that my immigrant parents envisioned for me. With the constant refrain from my grandmother and my mother about the importance of education, dedication, caring, and integrity I have been able to achieve the goals that I set for myself personally and professionally. I am the only person in my immediate family to have attended university and to have attained a BA and an MA, and I am currently working on my Doctor of Education. As I strived to reach my

goals, there were people along the way who told me I could not achieve what I set out to do, or that I should alter my career trajectory when I became a mother. As these voices tried to discourage and dissuade me, my internal response was, and always will be, “You have no idea who I am, nor do you know I follow in the footsteps of powerful and strong women who overcame all odds.”

While the obstacles that I face may pale in comparison to the lived experiences of the women who raised me, I think the grace and tenacity that they have instilled in me enables me to be resilient in the different roles I occupy as a school Principal, a mother, a wife, and a daughter.



SUPPORTING LEADERS IN A COMMUNITY

the words of Carleen Thomas

“Being a leader is role modelling how you wish a community to be.”

“Looking at the inlet, my grandfather would say, they are not going anywhere, and we are not going anywhere, we need to find a way to co-exist.”

“With all the stuff our mothers, fathers, and aunties have been through, what made them not give up demonstrates an innate desire to heal ourselves to become better. Growing up, I was taught the work I do is not just for me and my community but for the generations to come. As a grandmother, I see that coming into action now. In leadership, I don't have all the answers, skills, and strengths, but what I contribute is for the whole.”

“In my community, there was not that inequity between male and female in terms of who is a leader. We grew up knowing in our systems the males have this work to do, the females have this work to do, both types of work are important, and both are woven together.”

“It is easy to look at the up-and-coming leaders of our community and see how we have to help them weave together and become stronger.”

REFLECTIONS ON THE RICH DIALOGUE IN LEADING THE WAY

Dr. Robyne Hanley-Dafoe differentiated resiliency for me, making a distinction from sacrificing for everyone in the name of service, to modelling habits, healthy boundaries, and self-care that strengthen our communities.

From **Paula Gosal** came the value and centrality of education to resilience and the privileges it affords, all told through her family story.

And from **Carleen Thomas**, that the clarity of identity comes from your ancestors. With that identity comes the wisdom that we each contribute to the whole.

Our Leading the Way series has been supported by profoundly accomplished women who have generously shared their stories with our members and friends. These women are contributing to innovative thinking that fosters change and growth, and are leading the way for those who walk with them and those who will follow. Taking care of yourself while serving may seem like an insurmountable obstacle: it will be, until we ALL start doing it.

Watch for upcoming
Leading the Way
events from the BCPVPA

bcpvpa.org