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WATERLOO REGION

'Put yourselves out there and know you're not alone'

By **James Jackson** Record Reporter

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WATERLOO REGION — One of the earliest pieces of professional advice Sherry Shannon-Vanstone received came during her days of making and breaking codes for the National Security Agency in the United States.

It was the early 1980s and Shannon-Vanstone, who had just graduated from the University of Tennessee in 1982, was a mathematic cryptographer and one of the only women in her office. One day a supervisor approached her desk and said, "if you don't toot your own horn, no one else will."

That advice has stuck with Shannon-Vanstone throughout her career, including a stint in California's Silicon Valley in the late 1980s and early 1990s — another male-dominated environment she described as "toxic" — and her eventual arrival in Canada 27 years ago to join this country's burgeoning startup scene.

Sometimes you have to take a stand and make yourself heard.

"I think there are times when you have to be strong and stand up for yourself," said Shannon-Vanstone in an interview Friday of the role of women in traditionally male-dominated fields.

It hasn't always been easy. She's been called aggressive or assertive (and sometimes worse) but she's used her voice to emerge as one of Waterloo Region's most well-regarded entrepreneurs and an empowering voice for local women.

"Look at your motive and say 'I'm just standing my ground. I have something to contribute.'"

Shannon-Vanstone, 66, was recently named the recipient of the Women in Communications and Technology annual leadership award for entrepreneur of the year. Founded in 1991, Women in Communications and Technology is the only national non-profit that seeks to inspire and support women to achieve their highest career potential in Canada's digital economy.

This is accomplished through professional development, mentorship, advocacy and research, with the goal of closing the gender gap, promoting female leadership and advancing diversity across a range of industries.

Shannon-Vanstone said she's "honoured" by the recognition, and admitted it takes a lot of persistence and even a little "insanity" to become an entrepreneur.

She's been part of three successful startups since arriving in Canada in 1994; security technology firm Certicom (which was co-founded by her late husband, Dr. Scott Vanstone, in 1985 and acquired by BlackBerry in 2009), TrustPoint Innovation (acquired by ETAS Canada in 2017), and Profound Impact Corporation in 2018, which she founded in honour of her husband after his death in 2014.

Shannon-Vanstone is also co-chair of the Emmy Noether Council at Waterloo's Perimeter Institute for Theoretical Physics, which works to increase the number of women in physics around the world, and in 2015 she was named Waterloo Region's female innovator of the year.

Four years later, in 2019, Shannon-Vanstone received an honorary doctorate from Western University for her work encouraging women and girls to build a career in science, engineering, math and technology.

"I don't do it for the accolades. They're appreciated, but it's more about being impactful," she said.

Her latest startup, Profound Impact, is developing a social engagement and interaction platform that can be used by universities and alumni to engage, discover, and measure the impact the institution and its community have had on technology and the world.

Over her career, Shannon-Vanstone estimates she's hired somewhere around 200 people, and about half of them have been women. She's been an advocate of not only getting more girls interested in science, technology, engineering and mathematics in school or university (the so-called STEM subjects), but to pursue those studies beyond the classroom as part of their career.

In 2016, women made up 34 per cent of science, technology, engineering or mathematics bachelor's degree holders, and just 23 per cent of science and technology workers among Canadians aged 25 to 64, [according to Statistics Canada](#).

On March 11, Shannon-Vanstone will participate in a Women in Communications and Technology discussion panel titled "Boldly Go Where Few Women Have Gone Before" along with Françoise Gagnon (CEO of ADGA Group Consultants Inc.) and Sonia Brar (vice-president of customer operations strategy, design and delivery with Bell Communications).

It will be moderated by Carole Santerre, vice president of network reliability and service assurance with Shaw Communications.

You can register for the virtual panel by visiting www.wct-fct.com/en/programs/leadership-excellence-awards.

One of Shannon-Vanstone's motivations in life is to help women realize they're not alone. Even if they're the only female executive in their company, there is a network of women they can look toward for help and guidance.

"One who travels alone travels faster, but one who travels with others goes further," Shannon-Vanstone said, borrowing the phrase from Rudyard Kipling.

"The message I want to leave women is: Let's just do this. Put yourselves out there and know you're not alone."



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