

by E.Lisa Moses

She first broke the glass ceiling 20 years ago, when she became Executive Director of the Canadian Frozen Food Association at age 26. Ever since, Paulette Vinette has been crunching glass underfoot as her star continued to rise in the association sector, capturing positions such as President of the Canadian Society of Association Executives (CSAE) and President and CEO of the Canadian Soft Drink Association (CSDA).

With the kind of determination that athletes use to will their way to victory, Vinette has willed her way into the boardrooms of some of North America's top not-for-profits. In the 1970s, when the media had whipped the glass-ceiling issue into a white heat, she read an article stating that women weren't sitting at boardroom tables because they didn't have what it takes. At that point, she decided "to make sure I have the education, the training and the experience to get into one of those boardrooms." And she's been sitting at boardroom tables ever since.

The passionate path

Vinette's life has always been about working within her passion for people, which surfaced during her early years at boarding school. "I didn't have any siblings, so I started reaching out to others and creating my own 'family' as I went along," she declares. "I loved school, because it was a place I could go to interact, work with other people and feel part of a team." In high school, Vinette's volunteer work included helping out at a 150-person institution for mentally challenged boys. "From then on, I've never stopped doing volunteer work, most of it with mentally challenged people." That path has taken her into home hospice work, and she now serves as President of Trinity Home Hospice.

After studying psychology at Concordia and Carleton universities, Vinette fast-tracked into top association jobs by interweaving volunteer and paying work, and "spending incredible numbers of hours to make sure I succeeded". Her mainstay for acquiring broad experience in the sector was intensive volunteer work with the CSAE, an association that provides support, education and networking opportunities for executives in the not-for-profit sector. There, Vinette regularly attended networking events and conferences, worked on countless committees and gained her professional designation of Certified Association Executive (CAE). She has sat on the CSAE's national board of directors, won a number of prestigious awards and is now a CSAE honoured life member. And, through her network there, she built a career in the sector.

PASSION AND PURPOSE

From boarding school to the boardroom, Paulette Vinette has always crafted dreams into reality.

"Know who you are and what your priorities are."



Vinette attributes her success to hard work, an ability to bring calm, order and consensus to situations and results that impressed her employers – not to any affirmative action. Marks of her own style include earning the respect of her colleagues (mostly men in the early days) by handling herself “as a person, but not being afraid to be a woman.” In addition to tackling business issues fearlessly and walking a fine line at the office, this meant opting for a conservative business wardrobe, while dressing more flamboyantly at social events. In the 1970s, she was asked to bob her flowing blond hair because it was “too sexy” – and she did so, believing “you have to give to get. But I also know that, today, no one would dare ask you to do something like that.”

The fork in the road

At the turn of the millennium, Vinette took stock of her life and realized that much of the passion for her work had evaporated. “When my job at CSDA evolved into one of mainly advocacy from facilitator/mediator/planner, I realized that I was no longer in the proper place,” she notes. “My dream and vision had become blurred. So I knew I needed a change.” To help her focus on the right future for herself and to define a new dream, Vinette hired a life coach, who led her through a structured self-analysis program that included a battery of psychological and personality tests. She

also took a number of courses and seminars. One of those, offered by the American Society of Association Executives, made a particular impression on her: “It only takes a minute to change your life – the minute you decide what you’re going to do.”

This year-long path of introspection led to Vinette’s decisive minute, which sent her into a new direction, still within her vocation, that feels right for her. She recently left her position as President and CEO of the CSDA to lead Justice Canada’s Business Alliance on Crime Prevention. This initiative aims to address the root cause of crime and enhance community safety through a three-way partnership with government, the private sector and business associations. Her part-time contract with Justice Canada allows Vinette to provide consulting services to the association sector as well. In addition, she is acting Executive Director of the Tea Association of Canada.

Predicting the future

Leaving a secure job to head into a Great Unknown can be worrisome. But Vinette decided long ago that “there is no upside to fear. It robs you of energy.” And her efforts with terminally ill people have armed her with a survivor attitude. “Working with the dying certainly puts everything into perspective,” she reports. “I have learned to appreciate everything around me, and colour the lens on my life in a positive light.”

While Vinette has always had a packed schedule, she realizes that being in her own business will only increase her workload. She also knows that she must strive harder for balance between work and relaxation, and has taken a tough stance on disciplining herself. “I love golf and skiing, but had to trick myself into spending time on them,” she notes. “I bought a package for the golf season, and made a pact with a friend to play. And, for the winter, I purchased expensive ski equipment so I feel compelled to use it and not waste my money.” Over the years, Vinette has developed a knack for totally turning work off in her personal time, so she is noting a distinct improvement in both her golf game and her skiing.

While the Montreal native has held several jobs, lived in Montreal, Ottawa and Toronto, and travelled the world, she has always had one vocation – helping people. And that is one thing that’s not likely to change. She may go back into full-time association management after her contract at Justice Canada expires, expand her consulting practice or head off in a completely different direction.

Whatever that direction is, Vinette will continue to align her personality and values (who she is) with what she does, blending them into whatever environment she chooses. “Living your vocation through your career is a spiritual process,” she observes. “It’s a process that continually unfolds, leads to personal fulfillment and makes a contribution to society as a whole.” That only makes sense for a woman who knows who she is and what her priorities are.