



Kelly Patterson and Debbie Rathwell are lifelong friends and businesswomen who started 100 Women Who Care of Greater Saint John.  
PHOTO: APRIL CUNNINGHAM/FOR THE TELEGRAPH-JOURNAL

## **City's 100 Women Who Care started with 2**

They met through figure skating and both parted ways in their teens when their families moved to different parts of Canada, but Debbie Rathwell and Kelly Patterson would cross paths again.

It wasn't until years later, when they had both returned to Greater Saint John, built their respective careers and were looking for something more.

Rathwell, who runs her own corporate event planning business, Red, was at a tourism conference in Fredericton in 2013 when, at the tail end of a presentation about LinkedIn, a Halifax businesswoman dropped an idea that got Rathwell's adrenaline rushing.

"She had just started the first chapter of 100 Women Who Care in Halifax, which was the first chapter in Atlantic Canada," says Rathwell in an interview alongside Patterson in Java Moose in Rothesay.

“She started telling this story. To me, it was captivating and it went straight to my heart and to my all my senses that said, ‘This is the most sensible, efficient way to give back.’ And it just resonated with me. I thought, I’ve got to do this. I’ve got to take this back to my community.”

On the drive back to Saint John, Rathwell knew she wanted to set up Saint John’s own chapter of 100 Women Who Care — an organization that collects donations of \$100 from each member for a selected charity four times a year — but she didn’t want to do it alone. That’s when she thought of Patterson.

The women had always been friends but their lives had “taken different turns,” Rathwell says, and she knew it was time to reconnect and do something big.

“I always admired Kelly and she always was a great mentor, so I reached out to her,” she says. “The rest is history. Kelly said yes and off we went.”

Now the Saint John chapter of 100 Women Who Care is approaching its fourth anniversary, having raised more than \$388,000 over 16 meetings. There are nearly 240 members and “nobody shirks their responsibility.”

That means showing up with a chequebook at the Hatheway Pavilion at Lily Lake on a quarterly basis, ready and willing to give.

Each member, who is expected to contribute for at least one year, nominates a charity and each meeting, three charities are randomly selected to present. After the charity gives a five-minute talk “from the heart” without the use of audio/visual aids, members vote on their non-profit group of choice. The charity with the most votes receives all of the donations — allowing members to make one big, meaningful contribution.

Leading up to its first meeting in 2013, the group had 50 registrations within the first 48 hours, and 120 people showed up to the inaugural gathering.

“It was just magic,” Rathwell says. “The fire had been lit under all these women in Greater Saint John.”

At the last meeting in February, officials with the cash-strapped Cherry Brook Zoo took home a giant cheque for \$21,500. Other previous recipients include the Sophia Recovery Centre, Sistema NB Saint John Centre, Outflow Ministries’ Men’s Shelter and The ONE Change Inc.

“Often, when you give, you send your money somewhere but you don’t know 100 per cent where it goes,” Rathwell says.

"With 100 Women Who Care, you're part of the entire process: listening to the story or pitch, voting and writing the cheque. Everyone in that audience was part of that. So you feel really connected to the donation and the whole cause."

It's also relatively effortless, she adds. The meetings are usually less than an hour, and unlike many fundraisers, there are not tickets to sell or silent auction items to collect.

At the next meeting in June, zoo officials will be expected to report back on how the donation has made a difference, which "completes the circle," Patterson adds. All money raised is expected to stay local.

"Sometimes when you make a small donation to a charity, it can feel like a drop in the bucket," she says. "These groups literally walk out with a fist full of cheques — it's the coolest thing to see. It's enough money to get a project off the ground and you can do something right out of the gate, rather than having to wait for it to trickle in \$50 at a time."

The immediate impact of the donation works for donors as well, and while some members drop off over time, there isn't a meeting without new recruits.

"All you need to do is read the news to see how much need there is," Patterson says. "Saint John is going through a really rough patch."

The stories can pull on the heartstrings, but it may not always be obvious how to give, and busy people may not always get around to it.

For those who are able to commit to the \$100 donation, four times a year, 100 Women Who Care just makes sense. As the organization has developed over the years, Patterson and Rathwell have been able to lend their support to other groups in the Maritimes trying to get off the ground, including 100 Men Who Care Saint John, which is no longer in operation.

"At its root, we're both in sales," says Patterson, who is a stock broker and partner with Buckley Patterson Shaw Securities.

Dealing with the public and not being afraid to ask for help is probably key to the group's success and relative longevity, she says.

"We're also genuinely caring and respecting people," says Rathwell, "whether it's in the business world or in our personal world. Kelly and I both have a high respect and regard for other people — men or women — and we care."

And it's contagious. When the Pavilion at Lily Lake, a non-profit, notified the group they would have to increase the cost of the rental space, Patterson and Rathwell put the issue to the membership. They asked if the cost should come out of the recipient donations or whether extra donations should be collected each meeting.

Instead, so many individuals and businesses stepped up to pay the entire cost of each meeting room rental, they had to put all the names in a hat.

"The next several years are covered," Patterson says with a smile.

"So many people are proud to say they're a part of this," Rathwell says. "From the beginning, we hit the ground running – and we're not stopping anytime soon."