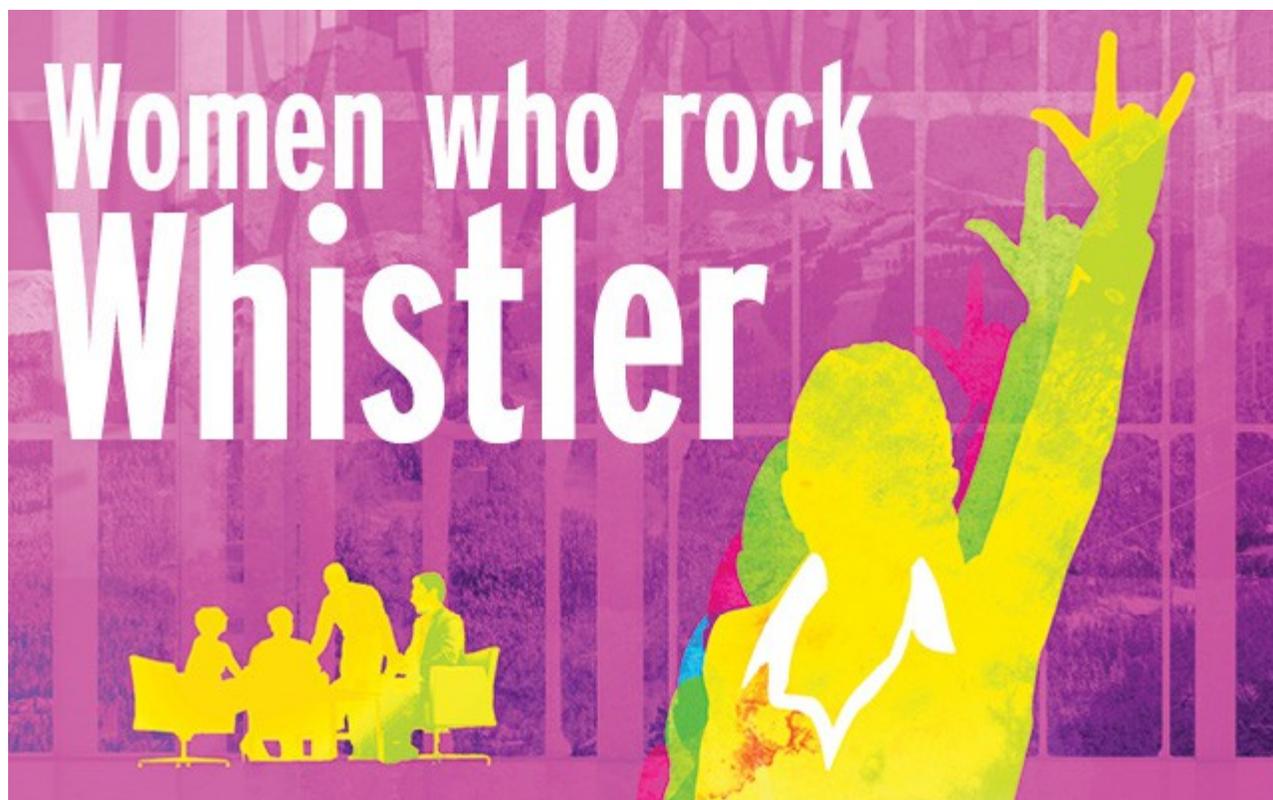


## Women who rock Whistler

Profiles of four women who have worked to make Whistler amazing

By Cindy Filipenko



Story by Cindy Filipenko

**WOMEN WHO ROCK WHISTLER** Profiles of four women who have worked to make Whistler amazing

**I**nternational Women's Day is celebrated in March and *Pique* thought it would be a good time to recognize the achievements of just a few of the women who have helped build Whistler.

Women have played significant roles in the development of Whistler since Myrtle Philip opened Rainbow Lodge with her husband Alex in 1914. Myrtle, the original "go-for-it girl" cast the mould for the thousands of women who have followed.

Today, with a few exceptions, women are well represented in all aspects of political, business and cultural life of the community. While complete gender blindness has yet to be fully realized in town, many of the "pioneering" women who came here in the '70s, '80s and '90s will tell you that being female has not been a major barrier to achieving their goals.

Together Mayor Nancy Wilhelm-Morden, entrepreneur/philanthropist Sue Adams, Tourism Whistler President Barrett Fisher and facilitator/community builder Maureen "Mo" Douglas have collectively given more than 100 years of their considerable energy and impressive skills. (Full disclosure: I am married to Mo Douglas, but after nearly 14 years together and raising two kids, Bridget, 24 and Spence, 16, I'm fairly objective.)

Today, all of these women continue to improve Whistler, through their work and participation in community life, through their vocations and their volunteerism. All four sit on boards and committees, generously mentor younger women and men, and consider going beyond the call of duty all in a day's work. Smart, funny and dedicated, they have worked to set the standard for excellence that has propelled the community forward. Once bright young sparks — three of them were under 30 when they put down roots in Whistler — they are now settling into their sage years. Here they share the wisdom they've earned being four of the women who rock Whistler.



Photo submitted

NANCY WILHELM-MORDEN Politician/Lawyer

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**NANCY WILHELM-MORDEN**

## Politician/Lawyer

ancy Wilhelm-Morden's story is a familiar one. "I came for a two-week vacation to see my boyfriend." The day before she was to start at the University of Waterloo, she called home and told her parents she wouldn't be coming home to Kitchener. Forty-two years later, she's still here, the mayor, a successful trial lawyer, a partner in a local law firm and married to the high-school boyfriend, for whom she ditched her first year at university, realtor Ted Morden.

While she returned to Ontario for one year at Waterloo University, she was soon back in Whistler living with Ted in a squatters' cabin in Alpine at a time when Whistler's full-time population was a mere 600 people.

She continued her studies part-time until she entered UBC Law School in 1980. By the mid-'80s, Wilhelm-Morden was practicing law in Vancouver, juggling a two-city family with an infant daughter and in her first term as what was then referred to as an "alderman" for the RMOW.

"I ran in 1984 because I was mad — in more than one way," jokes Wilhelm-Morden.

What motivated her was the fact the council of the day was looking at charging cross-country skiers to access the trails around Lost Lake. For the avid cross-country skier that was too bitter a pill to swallow. The battle over monetizing the trails was lost, but the future mayor had caught the political bug. (In 2014 she was elected to her sixth term on council and second as mayor.)

It soon became apparent that living full-time in Whistler would be the best option for her family.

"I thought I'd set up a small country practice and do wills and conveyances," says Wilhelm-Morden.

The practice proved to be anything but quiet.

"I was running trials right away. I had tons of clients. Then I had my second daughter and realized I couldn't do it on my own."

She merged her company with local law firm Race and Company, where she continues to be a partner today.

Having lived in Whistler for more than four decades, Wilhelm-Morden thinks the reason women fare so well in their careers in the resort has to do with the women it attracts.

"I think Whistler tends to attract people who are more free-spirited... more willing to take risks," says the mayor. She fires off a list of those risk takers: Senator Nancy Greene Raine, who opened one of the first lodges in the Village; realtor Ann Chiasson, who owns Re/Max offices throughout the Sea-to-Sky and Trudy Alder, who worked as a general contractor as during Whistler's early days. "There have

been strong, risk-taking women here right from the beginning."

"Back in the day, there were hardly any women here. Maybe that was a reason women were notable. We were outnumbered, and you had to kind of elbow your way up the top, or you'd be smothered by all the guys who were here."

The second-term mayor finds her municipal political career to be as rewarding as her legal career.

"I love the fact we can make decisions that impact people's lives the next day. We're nimble. We can see something and react in an immediate way," she says, noting that this type of flexibility is impossible when working at a provincial or federal level.

The nimbleness of local government has allowed Wilhelm-Morden to play crucial roles in such positives as bringing the Audain Art Museum to town and saving the Emerald Forest from becoming six large estate lots.

Her advice for women considering political life?

"I would say the most important thing is perseverance. Have a thick skin. If you have a family, have a partner who can help," says Wilhelm-Morden.

Looking back at the fledgling community she joined in the '70s and comparing it to today's Whistler, a rueful smile crosses the mayor's face.

"There were things we did back in the '70s that are better left unsaid. I'm glad the town has grown."

She is particularly pleased that this growth has allowed for her adult daughters, Sarah, a PR coordinator for Whistler Blackcomb, and Jessie, who works as one of Wilhelm-Morden's legal assistants, to pursue rewarding careers in their hometown.

"One of the things I love about Whistler is that there's still that youthful love of being here, regardless of how old you are. I talk to (long-time local) Peter Alder and he still has that twinkle in his eye that he had 35, 40 years ago."

Watching Wilhelm-Morden in council chambers it's hard to imagine her picking fruit at her Anderson lake retreat and making jam, but that's one of the things that keeps the busy trial lawyer and mayor of Canada's most unusual small town grounded. Another thing that feeds her soul and literally keeps her feet on solid ground is her commute to work, a trip that's walked 65 per cent of the way through the forest.

"I have a lovely work-life balance."



Photo submitted

SUE ADAMS Entrepreneur/Philanthropist

## SUE ADAMS

### Entrepreneur/Philanthropist

It's hard to find a charitable event or not-for-profit organization in town that's not associated with entrepreneur Sue Adams. Among the Whistler groups that have benefited from her talents, broad network and generous support: Whistler Arts Council, Women of Whistler, the Whistler Chamber of Commerce, the Whistler Health Centre, Tourism Whistler, the Whistler Learning Centre and most recently the Audain Art Museum. Witty, razor sharp and as direct as the Peak 2 Peak Gondola, the owner of The Grocery Store and Pemberton Valley Supermarkets has a reputation for getting 'er done and enticing others to do the same.

As a girl growing up on a sheep farm in Australia, Adams had two plans for life after school. She thought she'd either like to be an art teacher or run a groovy (it was the '60s) boutique. Her mother feared that either path could lead to her daughter becoming embroiled in a bohemian lifestyle.

"I fancied myself running a little boutique with hand-crafted items. Fine linens, that sort of thing," says Adams.

When her father discovered the price of retail space was prohibitive, Sue was sent down another path became an occupational therapist.

"Working with people, motivating people, learning systems... that OT course was the best business training," says Adams.

After working as an OT for a while she then "like every Aussie, had to travel overseas." She ended her travels in Vancouver where, while working in mental health, she met her husband, Bob. They left the psychiatric field and took their considerable people skills into the restaurant business, operating the successful Amorous Oyster and its sister, The Contented Sole.

As the restaurants grew and needed less hands-on management, Adams decided she had to do something for herself and joined the The Western Women's Business Association, starting a lifelong commitment to community involvement. Whistler's boards, committees and foundations have been the recipients of her considerable energy and expertise since she and Bob, weekend warriors who had been coming to the mountains since the early-'80s, became permanent residents in 1988.

While the couple wasn't keen on the idea of opening a restaurant in Whistler due to the seasonal nature of the resort, they were looking for opportunities to nurture their entrepreneurial spirits. Local real estate legend, Don Wensley, told the Adams' that he had a venture that might work for them.

"We took a major financial risk and put everything on the line and bought The Grocery Store. It was perfect timing for us — it was such an exciting time."

It was also an exciting time for women in Whistler.

"When we started the Women of Whistler in 1995 it was because women were looking for more opportunities.

"I was involved in the Western Business Women's Association in Vancouver, and I was responsible for the program and took a group of women down from Whistler including Thelma Johnstone (Chamber of Commerce) and Diane Eby (RMOW alderman) to tell the story of Whistler," says Adams. "The women ran the businesses in town because the men were running the mountain."

"I think women have always been welcome at the table, even more so now. Whistler is like a family. As a family grows and matures things level out," she says, pointing to an era of collaboration that started with the 2010 Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games.

She cautions that the maturing of the resort has also affected how new businesses fare.

"It's not easy to go into business in Whistler now. It's very expensive. I think in the past a lot of people managed to get into business because of luck," says Adams. "Twenty, twenty-five years ago there were so many opportunities. Now it's a pretty tight market. I sit on a bunch of business boards; you have to understand your concept, your market and how you're going to finance your business. A lot of people don't understand this.

"That said, I think it's time to see some new business in Whistler, I'm not sure what it is. If people can find a niche, it can work, but you really have to have a cracker product."

She points out that to be in business here you don't necessarily have to have your own business; career options can be explored within larger local companies like the Gibbons Group.

When asked what people might be surprised to know, Adams says that despite being involved in a lot of charitable work, she doesn't see herself as an event planner or a fundraiser. She points to personality tests that were given to members of one of the boards she sits on. The results: Adams' chief strengths were as a connector and a "maximizer." She thinks that description fits perfectly.

"I join all these groups only with the hope I can maximize it, that I make it the best organization it can be. And I love connecting people."



Photo submitted

**BARRETT FISHER** President of Tourism Whistler

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## **BARRETT FISHER**

### **President of Tourism Whistler**

In 1990, Barrett Fisher made a decision that would radically alter her life. The Webster award-winning, managing editor of *The North Shore News*, had fallen for a guy who worked at Blackcomb Mountain. Being together meant that one of them

had to move. Landing a job as director of advertising and promotions at Tourism Whistler (TW) sealed the deal. Twenty-six years later, she's still with that guy — husband Otto Kamstra — the mother of a 15-year-old daughter, Pietra, and the president of Tourism Whistler, a job she's held since 2004.

Tourism Whistler has long been known as a bastion of high-achieving women. Fisher thinks this is a reflection of the people attracted to the industry, and the community.

"When you look at Whistler as a whole I would argue that we have amazing male and female leaders, it attracts like-minded people with a passion for the mountains who have determination and drive," says Fisher.

"If you do look outside of Whistler to the tourism industry, if you look at university and colleges where they are giving tourism and hospitality training, what you'll find is that the majority of participants are women."

And while the perception is that women run the show at TW, Fisher points out that the gender split is actually about 60/40, with 40 percent male employees, the majority of whom work in the organization's operational sector which includes the Whistler Golf Club.

"I wouldn't be in the position I am today if there wasn't really gender equity. My board of directors — when I applied for the position, was, as is the case now — male-dominated."

Fisher, who'd been acting president for a year, was put through a rigorous process including psychological testing and a presentation about her vision, one that would take TW through to the 2010 Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games.

"I would argue they hired me not based on gender, but because they felt I was the right match for the organization and had what they were looking for at the time," says Fisher.

She believes that the collaborative spirit of Whistler has been a positive force in shaping her career and can be for others considering a career with TW.

"I have been able to continue to grow in the organization and in Whistler. I have found Whistler to be very supportive, accepting and encouraging. I think Whistler is a dynamic, ever-changing environment, and no one is prepared to sit back on their laurels here. It's always about, 'What's next?' 'How do we continue to evolve?'"

When it comes to finding those people who can push the limits, Fisher thinks an even playing field is essential.

"It shouldn't be about gender, but embracing people who can do the job and take the organization to the next level."

And that story that Fisher received BC's most prestigious journalism award for —

the Webster? It was an eight-part series on a corrupt development that had been propelled forward through backroom deals and political bribes. After she filed the piece she immediately felt a little queasy about possible repercussions. Would the developers "get" her? Would she be sued? She never guessed she'd win an award for it.

"It was the scariest thing I've ever done, but one of the most rewarding."



Photo submitted

MAUREEN "MO" DOUGLAS Facilitator/Community Builder

## MAUREEN "MO" DOUGLAS

### Facilitator/Community Builder

When Mo Douglas came to town in 1987, it was as a summer contractor running the street entertainment programs for Tourism Whistler (TW). Three years of summer contracts translated to a full-time job in 1990 as TW's director of festivals and events. It was an exciting time for Douglas and Whistler.

"It was a young community. We were a young organization. There were very few people over 40 in leadership positions. We had energy. We believed. We didn't know we could fail," she says. "As the resort was growing, it was allowing us to grow and continue this passionate mission to see how much more could we do, how much greater could we make this place, how many people could we host successfully."

"(As women) we didn't have to fight our way to the table. We showed up. Did great work. And we developed very strong partnerships with both men and women at the table."

After 10 years with TW, it was time for a change. She founded her own firm with the expectation that she would work in cultural tourism, still be involved in event production and develop plans and strategies for other communities.

"I was committed to seeing where the road would take me," says Douglas.

The road led to a position with the 2010 Olympic Bid Corporation. That turned into a seven-year gig as director of community relations for the Vancouver Organizing Committee for the 2010 Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games.

Today she's a sought-after facilitator and community builder working in public, workplace and leadership engagement locally, nationally and internationally. She is also currently the managing consultant at Whistler Arts Council, assisting the organization as it searches for its next leader. Like many organizations in Whistler, it's one filled with dynamic women.

Douglas thinks the reason so many women's careers have flourished in the resort is the fact that tourism drives this town.

"I taught a couple semesters in the tourism diploma program at BCIT in the early 2000s — the numbers were about 10-per-cent-men to 90-per-cent women," she says.

Douglas thinks another reason women succeed in Whistler is the town's spirit of collaboration.

"We believe in each other. There is incredible collaboration. That doesn't mean we're always holding hands and singing 'Kumbaya,' but that there's room for healthy conflict and robust discussions that take us to better solutions. No one picks up their ball and goes home. Celebrating the Olympics with people I had worked with and cared about for more than 20 years was amazing — we stood together sharing in that success."

So what does Douglas think the attributes are for young people wanting to feel that same sense of collaborative success working in the resort?

"Show up. Pay attention. Have a really great attitude. Be kind and interested in playing well with others. And don't be afraid to speak up and bring ideas forward because they are listened to in Whistler."

A champion for Whistler, collaborative leadership and going for it, there's a side to Douglas that might surprise people.

"Although a lot of peoples' experience of me is seeing me behind a microphone because of the work I do, I'm way more of an introvert than people would expect. There's nothing I love more than a really quiet Friday night to make the end of my

week perfect."

Driven, ambitious and ultimately caring, these four women have proven again and again that it's the power of the positive that propels Whistler forward. Their collective achievements have had incredible impacts on the community and served to make gender a non-issue in our progressive mountain town. They've built their careers rocking Whistler and we're all the better for it.

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