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ALWAYS PROTECT YOUR JOY

BY DAVID GARGARO

BARB STEGEMANN: FOUNDER OF THE 7 VIRTUES

Barb Stegemann became a social entrepreneur before it was cool. She wrote a book that empowers women to use their buying power to promote peace and make a difference in the world. Then she began sourcing orange blossom oil for perfume to support farmers in Afghanistan. Her company, The 7 Virtues, has expanded its mission into other countries while selling perfumes in Sephora stores across the U.S. and Canada.

Stegemann has done all this – and more – by committing to protect her joy, no matter what stands in her way or what is going on around her. Meet her once and you'll understand what that means. She is honest, vivacious and passionate, and she connects with everyone who hears her message.

Humble beginnings taught important lessons

In 1977, when she was eight years old, Stegemann's family moved from Quebec to Nova Scotia, her mother's home province. Due to the struggling economy, her father lost his business and later left the family. While her mom needed welfare to raise her daughters on her own, living in Antigonish offered many sources of support, such as the 4-H Club, school, church and community.

Stegemann learned to be resourceful. She worked at her high school's student union, wrote for the newspaper, served food at the university cafeteria, and did volunteer work. She believed that education could elevate people out of

poverty. In 1987, Stegemann studied sociology and philosophy at the University of King's College at Dalhousie University.

"It was amazing to be around such an educated and worldly group of students," said Stegemann. "I was also fortunate to learn from teachers who expected a lot from me. They meant the world to me, as they helped me to rise up to meet their expectations."

After graduation, Stegemann spent several years looking for her true calling. She volunteered with street youth, and spent three years as a flight attendant. Even though she was not doing her life's work, Stegemann's light shone through. Impressed by her attitude, a pilot remarked that her gift was her joy.

Stegemann went on to study journalism, and moved to British Columbia to pursue a career and raise her children. In 2000, she launched Acclimatize Communications, a public relations firm that worked with large corporate clients, which exposed her to the possibilities of economic and community development.





Tragedy creates a spark

Stegemann first met Captain Trevor Greene in 1987 while in university, and they've been best friends ever since. In 2006, he volunteered for duty in Afghanistan, helping civilians to get better access to clean drinking water and improve their lives. During one meeting, a young man attacked Greene with an axe, critically wounding him. When Stegemann heard the news, she left her professional responsibilities to be by his side in the hospital to help with his recovery.

"I wanted to be a part of his healing journey, and do whatever

was needed to help him," said Stegemann. "I also promised him that I would continue his mission."

Greene wanted to bring peace to Afghanistan, and Stegemann felt that empowering Afghan women would help to accomplish this mission. The solution lay in the stoic wisdom taught through the ages, including Plato's "The Republic," which she had studied in university. She believed that women have significant buying and voting power but were not using that power effectively to reverse the issues of war and poverty.

Stegemann made a

commitment to write a book, sitting down to write every day for two years. She based it on the concept of seven virtues: wonder, balance, truth, courage, justice, wisdom and beauty. The result was "The 7 Virtues of a Philosopher Queen: A woman's guide to living and leading in an illogical world." Stegemann self-published, dedicating the book to Greene, and launched it in 2008 on International Women's Day. The book was a huge success, and is currently in its seventh printing.

Turning words into action

While doing book promotion



in 2010, Stegemann wanted to do more to support her mission. Then she heard a radio interview with Abdullah Arsala, an Afghan man who was trying to convince local farmers to grow orange blossoms that could be distilled into essential oils for perfumes, rather than opium poppies for the illegal drug trade. Within the week, she flew to Ottawa and asked the Canadian International Development Agency to help find Arsala,

"Ambassadors have been begging the Canadian government to work with leaders of influence in Afghanistan who have the respect of the community," said Stegemann. "I learned that helping

farmers to earn by growing legal crops would be honoring their faith. They don't care about your religion or sex when you treat them fairly and pay on time."

Stegemann connected with Arsala and put together \$8,000 – including the last \$2,000 from her Visa card – to purchase his last barrel of orange blossom oil. She worked with a Toronto perfumer to create her first fragrance: Afghanistan Orange Blossom. She turned that investment into \$30,000 of revenue. And so, her perfume company, The 7 Virtues, was born, with the mission statement "Make Perfume, Not War."

The first step was a success, but Stegemann had to keep the momentum going, and for that she needed money. She tried to get a bank loan, but to no avail. So she turned to "Dragon's Den," a CBC show that enables entrepreneurs to pitch their business ideas and products to Canadian business investors. Stegemann gave her pitch and asked for \$75,000 in exchange for 15 percent of her company. Her story struck a nerve with several "dragons," including Brett Wilson. He agreed to her proposal, making Stegemann the first female entrepreneur from Atlantic Canada to land a deal on the show. (Wilson currently owns 25 percent of the company.)

Appearing on "Dragon's Den" brought a lot of attention, as the show aired just before Valentine's Day in 2011. The 7 Virtues landed a deal to sell its perfumes in The Bay's retail stores. Stegemann received numerous awards and accolades for her accomplishments, and was able to help Arsala expand his distillery business by purchasing more product and bringing in new buyers. The international attention led to

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requests to expand her model – and perfume line – to other countries, including Rwanda, Haiti, India and the Middle East.

"We want to work with distilleries at the grassroots level, as you can't tell people what to grow or how to grow it," said Stegemann. "It has to be led by the community, by people who are passionate so that they are truly on board with what we are doing. You also have to pay fair market value, rather than giving donations, because charity does not work."

Along comes Sephora

In 2016, Stegemann went to Haiti to do volunteer work following the devastation of Hurricane Matthew. She learned via email that Sephora, one of the largest prestige



Barb Stegemann delivering a key note address. Photo credit: Giacomo Bruno

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YOU CANNOT BE BRAVE OR WISE UNLESS YOU ARE CHALLENGED

”

beauty retailers in the world, had launched its Accelerates program, which mentors female entrepreneurs in the beauty business. She applied, and in 2017 she was one of 10 women – out of 1800 applicants – accepted into the program.

The six-month program taught the essentials of branding, marketing and redeveloping products for Millennials. She learned from experts in Google, Facebook and Instagram, and partnered with Sephora mentors who had in-depth beauty industry experience. Although the program did not guarantee anything, the result was an exclusive partnership between The 7 Virtues and Sephora. Stegemann redesigned her fragrance collection to appeal to Millennial women, and it has been an unparalleled success.

“We launched in Canadian Sephora stores about a year ago, and six months ago in the U.S., and our products keep selling out,” said Stegemann. “We’ve exceeded sales projections by at least 50 percent, with almost no advertising. We got into another 100 stores four months ago, and we’re on track to expand into hundreds more.”

In addition to reformulating its seven original perfumes, The 7 Virtues is expanding into new products and formulations. This includes body oil sourced from Puerto Rico, candles imbued with the various scents, and a self-care kit packaged with Stegemann’s book. All of its products are organic, hypoallergenic, cruelty-

free, paraben-free, vegan-friendly and ethically sourced.

Overcoming challenges and achieving goals

You might think that Stegemann’s biggest challenge would have been trying to break into the competitive perfume industry, or forming relationships with farmers in developing nations. These were “minor” compared to what she describes as “patriarchal thinking” in her own backyard. Stegemann was constantly underestimated and challenged in her ability to achieve her goals. She was determined to never let anyone stand in her way or prevent her from achieving her mission.

“You cannot be brave or wise unless you are challenged,” said Stegemann. “I have a deep belief in that I must always protect my joy with gusto, no matter what is going on around me. I am not religious, but I have faith in

something bigger than me.”

Stegemann also learned that you can believe in an idea, but if it’s not the right time or place, you could be spinning your wheels. Although relatively isolated in Nova Scotia, she was able to become part of a global partnership of people who believed in what she was doing. She followed the credo of keeping her “eyes in the boat” and focusing on making a great product while also making a difference.

“When you’re running a social enterprise, return on investment is important, but you also need return on love,” said Stegemann. “We could charge more for our products but we choose not, as no one has to make all the money. We want our customers to be part of the mission.”

For more information on Barb Stegemann, visit: www.barbstegemann.com or www.the7virtues.com

