

WOMEN'S NETWORK OFFERS SUPPORT DURING PANDEMIC CHALLENGES

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There's no question that local small businesses have been navigating some challenging waters since the pandemic began four months ago.

But for the members of Cornerstone Women's Network, the task has been made a bit easier as they support one another from afar in a COVID-19 business environment.

The group of Halton Hills entrepreneurial women has temporarily traded in its in-person networking sessions and events for virtual support via Zoom meetings, social media group chats and online promotion of each other's businesses and services.

"When you have 30 to 40 people committed to cross-promoting each other, there's a light at the end of the tunnel," said Andrea Hadlington, a local insurance broker who founded the group in 2012 with realtor Sara Haines.

"We know where they (members) need help, we know if they're having a sale and we spread the word, and we follow each other on social media and share those messages as well."

In the early weeks of the pandemic,

Haines said the support provided by the women's network was particularly crucial.

"Almost all of our businesses were completely upside down, with a lot of unknowns," she said. "It was so beneficial for our mental health to have a network of other people who are also feeling the impact of this (pandemic) in a different way. These women are like the net to catch you when you feel like you're falling. It's really comforting in such an unknown time."

The Cornerstone women have continued to help others in the community, despite the COVID-19-related cancellation of their signature fundraiser Ladies of the '80s Party, which supports the group's annual Entrepreneurial Spirit Awards.

The initiative bestows three \$500 scholarships on female graduating students at each Halton Hills high school who've shown a passion and talent for business.

This year, the award continued and was named in honour of the late Valerie Bloomfield, who owned Make It So Printing in downtown Georgetown.

Winners are selected by teachers facilitating the business programs at each school, with Kylie Wenger earning the 2020 award at Acton High and Justine McDermot at Christ the King. Georgetown District High School will announce its winner



Sara Haines photo

Group Zoom calls are among the ways the Cornerstone Women's Network members are supporting each other at a time when in-person gatherings aren't possible.

later this year.

The group has also tentatively rescheduled its annual golf tournament to the fall — an event that raises thousands for Cancer Assistance Services of Halton Hills.

Hadlington and Haines said their network is always looking for new members, even during the pandemic.

The group is category-exclusive, meaning each member represents a different type of business.

"We really put a lot of emphasis on sup-

porting the person in our group who's in that business, versus trying to spread ourselves too thin," said Haines. "We become each other's trusted adviser in the industry that we represent in the group."

She said one of the most rewarding aspects of Cornerstone has been watching others start new businesses and seeing them grow and flourish.

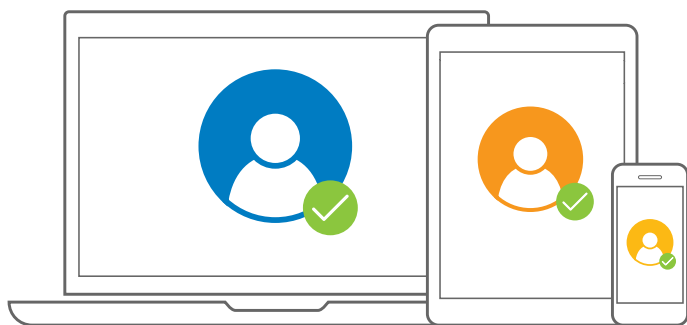
For example, Hadlington said Cornerstone member Anita Bergsma took her dream to own a cleaning business and worked hard to transform it from an idea to a full-fledged success.

"It was amazing to watch that happen," she said. "And she's not the only one — there are others we've helped and mentored. It's an organic thing that happens when you have all of these like-minded people together." For further details visit cornerstonewomensnetwork.com.

STORY BEHIND THE STORY: As the local economy continues to be impacted by COVID-19, the IFP wanted to find out what supports are helping to get the Halton Hills business community back on its feet. We reached out to the Cornerstone Women's Network, which continues to meet regularly during the pandemic — albeit virtually — for insight.

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