

OPEN COMMUNICATION IS ESSENTIAL

INTERVIEW

Jo-Anne McDonald has headed our Canadian subsidiary, ARAG Services Corporation in Toronto, since 2018. Cyberbullying has also become a major issue of concern in Canada. In the following Interview, the 52-year-old CEO, talks about equality, shattering the glass-ceiling and how she dealt with bullies in College.

Jo-Anne, how would you describe the situation regarding equal opportunity in Canada?

JO-ANNE MACDONALD The equal opportunity landscape in Canada continues to improve year by year. For example, Donna Strickland, a professor at the University of Waterloo, was awarded the Nobel Prize for Physics in 2018. Women are coming into the spotlight in Canada and showing that being female is neither a crutch to lean on nor necessarily a prohibitive factor.

In 2012 the whole world was shocked by the suicide of Amanda Todd, a 15-year-old Canadian girl who had been bullied online. How did you experience the incident at the time?

JO-ANNE MACDONALD I was living in British Columbia with my teenage son when this tragic incident occurred. As a mother I felt very empathetic towards Amanda and her family. No child should ever have to suffer such debilitating and isolating treatment.

More and more adolescents – and adults as well – are becoming victims of cyberbullying. Do you think that awareness of bullying and cyberbullying in Canadian society and the Canadian government has changed since Amanda Todd’s suicide?

JO-ANNE MACDONALD I do believe that awareness of both bullying and cyberbullying has changed since Amanda Todd’s death. The stigma surrounding mental health issues in Canada has dissipated in recent years. Children are taught in school how to approach such matters as mental health issues and to have the courage to report any destructive behaviour they witness or suffer themselves.

ARAG’s Canadian subsidiary was founded in 2015, and you have been CEO since March 2018. Do you support initiatives or activities at ARAG Canada that are devoted to combating bullying?

JO-ANNE MACDONALD We have a very open culture here at ARAG Canada and encourage our employees to talk to senior management about any issues they may face

in the workplace. We are implementing a review procedure so that if employees do wish to express a concern anonymously, they will be able to do so and receive feedback and achieve resolution at the company level.

You lead a team of seven people. As CEO, what are you doing to ensure that equal opportunity becomes part of a living corporate culture?

JO-ANNE MACDONALD We have taken several steps to ensure that equal opportunity becomes a part of our living corporate culture. We hold team meetings at which all staff members have an equal opportunity to contribute to discussions that take place at these meetings and during our quarterly strategy meetings. We also insist that all employees take part in educational events twice yearly in order to continue learning and improving their skills.

Bullying and cyberbullying are most common in school environments. You were a teacher before you joined ARAG. Did you ever experienced bullying or cyberbullying during your



teaching career? And if so, how did you deal with it?

JO-ANNE MACDONALD As a college teacher, I did not personally experience bullying or cyberbullying, since my students were quite a bit older and had more self-confidence and life experience, which had made them stronger.

Do you fear that your child or your family will ever become victim of cyberbullying? What would you do if you witnessed cyberbullying in your personal environment?

JO-ANNE MACDONALD Parents are always concerned that their loved ones could become victims of bullying or cyberbullying. One of the most important things is to ensure that lines of communication are kept open and that the victim feels supported. It is only through honest and empathetic dialog that the root of any problem can be identified and solutions can be developed.

Many men, including even those in political office, seem to have a very

ambiguous relationship with the concept of equality. How do you as a woman deal with the fact that even those men are bullies – especially towards women?

JO-ANNE MACDONALD The unfortunate truth is that you are likely to face bullies in all areas of life. Especially in such a prominent role in an internationally successful company, it is important for me to stand my ground and not give in to bullies or anyone who questions my abilities.

The so-called glass ceiling prevents people from certain segments of society from advancing to leadership positions.

Did you encounter this phenomenon during your own career, or were you ever actually prevented from advancing by bullying?

JO-ANNE MACDONALD It was always more difficult to be the only woman in a room full of men, not because I felt intimidated, but because they thought I did. I made an extra effort to put myself out there and to not be overshadowed by my male counter-

parts, emphasizing that there was no difference in our abilities solely because I was a woman.

How do you generally advise women when it comes to asserting their right to equal opportunity?

JO-ANNE MACDONALD I believe that women need to continue to step outside the box and follow their passions. I try to remind women that it is not their gender that has become a limitation, but a lack of confidence despite the many amazing things that make being a woman great.