

A PROFILE OF SUSAN BAINBRIDGE: FINDING YOUR VOICE

Katherine LEBLANC
kleblanc2@learn.athabascau.ca
Athabasca University, Canada

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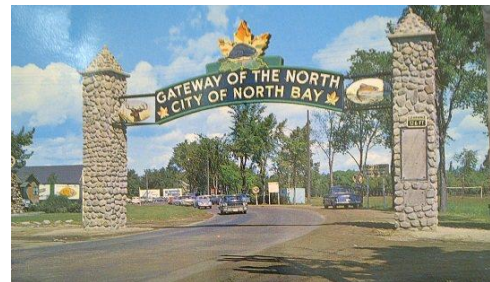
ABSTRACT

To be an effective leader, individuals must learn to 'find their voice.' Susan Bainbridge has worked tirelessly to ensure that those with whom she works are empowered to confidently reach their intended goals, through building their understanding of the importance of voicing their ideas and visions. This paper profiles her life and accomplishments, as well as her beliefs and intentions with those she instructs, mentors, assists, and coaches. It overviews Bainbridge's philanthropy and her firm conviction that helping one person at a time to overcome their challenges adds value to your own existence. Changing one person's life, ripples out across their family and community. Although she has quietly worked on her projects for a lifetime, she now shares her story only in the hope that it will encourage readers to help others throughout their own lives. Leadership is facilitating and motivating others to be the best they can be. It is also about finding the joy in giving, and watching others succeed and find happiness.

Keywords: Susan Bainbridge, distance education, online distance learning, leadership, philanthropy, feminism

Writing a story of the accomplishments of women is essential. It is vital for women and girls to be exposed to positive role models. It is also important that society celebrates the accomplishments of women and shares their stories. Dr. Susan Bainbridge is one of those role models whose life and achievements are celebrated and shared here.

Dr. Susan Bainbridge is many things to many people. She is a mother, an educator, a philanthropist, a writer, a humanitarian, a feminist, an activist, and a mentor. No matter what hat she wears, her focus has been on improving the lives of others. This is evident in the way she connects with people through interaction and empowerment. Susan was born and raised in North Bay, Ontario, Canada. This small city, located in Northern Ontario, is often referred to as the Gateway to the North. North Bay sits on Lake Nipissing and is situated approximately 300 kilometers from Toronto, the province's capital, and Ottawa, the capital of Canada. Susan grew up in a loving and caring family. She had very close connections with her maternal grandmother and grandfather, as they were instrumental in helping to raise her. As the granddaughter of a local politician, Susan learned at an early age the importance of making connections with people, listening to what others had to say, and understanding that her own voice was important. As early as three years old, Susan was accompanying her grandfather on the campaign trail. Susan truly enjoyed spending time with her grandfather and, at the same time, learned the importance of politicians hearing concerns of their constituents and actively try to find solutions for their communities. Looking closely at Susan's life, one can easily see the major influence her family has had on the person she is and her significant presence in the world she lives in.



Susan has always felt the drawing need to help others. This is a theme that has run through her entire life. She willingly gives to others. This is an attribute that was instilled in her persona early in her childhood. Each year at Christmas, her father would prepare a cheque for the Salvation Army. When the Salvation Army knocked on her parent's door, she watched her father give them the cheque. Susan looked at her dad and said, "that is a lot of money." Her dad told her that if it does not hurt to give, you are not giving enough. This is a sentiment that would stick with Susan throughout her adult life. She always gives, even when it hurts.

There is an old saying that "children should be seen and not heard." This was not Susan's experience growing up. Susan was empowered by her grandfather to use her voice. She recalled a time at the dinner table when the adults were participating in a discussion; she interjected into the discussion to ask if she could say something. It was her grandfather that stated, "of course, as long as it is of value." Susan used her voice that day, and learned that her voice had meaning and was significant.



Susan also acknowledges that women often must learn to find their voice. She did so at the family dining table, but she attributes that to the men and women in her family who supported her in finding her voice. Today, she encourages, inspires, and promotes other women to do the same; to find their voices, so their stories can be shared.

Not only did Susan use her voice at home and with her family, but she used it in school as well. When Susan entered high school, she was elected as president of the student council. This was the beginning of her formal leadership experience, as she would go on in life to lead educational teams and structures in the years to come.

When Susan was in high school in Ontario, the province offered grade 13. In some jurisdictions it was a compulsory year for students who wished to attend post-secondary education. Susan knew she wanted to further her education and aspired to enter the field of law; however, her mother had different views on this. Her mom told her that "women do not do that," and encouraged her to choose a more suitable career, like teaching or nursing. So, after graduation in 1969, Susan began her pursuit to become a teacher.

At that time, there was not a Bachelor of Education program like the ones present in Canada today, so Susan went to Teacher's College in North Bay. This college, originally name Normal School until 1953, was known for hiring faculty that provided a rigorous program which created well-prepared teachers. After one year of college, Susan took the opportunity to pursue a bachelor's degree through distant education courses, which were delivered via the television through the Knowledge Network. This would be Susan's first experience with distance education, but it would not be her last. In fact, over the course of her life, she would take online courses, teach online, and provide opportunities for her own children to receive education online.



Susan's extensive teaching career began in Ontario; however, there was a time in her first two years of teaching, she was not sure if it would continue. Her strong will and her fight for equal rights for women nearly lost her that first job. In the early 1970s, there was a formal dress code for women. They were expected to wear a dress or a skirt at work. Susan did not wish to conform to this dress code. She broke the women's dress code and wore a pantsuit to work. Susan had not been at the school for more than two hours when she was told by the Superintendent at the time that she needed to change. Susan's response was a hard "no." Not only was Susan adamant that she would not conform, she indicated to her Superintendent that the rules needed to change or she would take her cause to the local news station. Her employers explained that the rules would not be changing, so Susan did

the interview with the news station as promised. When she got to school the next day, she was not sure what the response would be. Her principal met with her and explained to her that she did not have to wear a dress at work and her professional dress would suffice. This would be the first of many times Susan would fight for women and help to empower them, especially in the workplace.

One of Susan's passions has always been to travel and see the world. After two years of teaching in Ontario, Susan yearned to explore. In 1972, she accepted a teaching position in Fort Good Hope, Northwest Territories, Canada. Fort Good Hope was a very small, Indigenous community in Canada's high arctic. Susan quickly learned to adjust to the harsh climate, to the varying daylight hours, and new cultural experiences.

After two years in the Northwest Territories, Susan's next adventure took her to the Yukon, Canada. Susan would spend the next ten years in the Yukon where her leadership skills would continue to grow. She took on various leadership roles in the Yukon, including becoming the principal of her school. Her leadership abilities were recognized by the newly appointed leader of the Territory, and she was given the position of Chairperson of the Yukon Housing Corporation.

During Susan's ten years in the Yukon, she also became a mother and started raising two of her children there before moving to Vancouver, British Columbia.

Susan was fortunate during her time in the Lower Mainland as her progressive school district allowed her to teach at the same school her children attended. Her third child was also born while she was living in the Vancouver area. Susan was a working mom with three children to raise. She had found her niche professionally teaching high school and loving it. Her own daughter, Melissa, explained that students at the school loved having her as a teacher. Melissa recalls that her friends would often tell her that her mom was their favourite teacher, and explained how students felt the learning came alive when her mom was teaching them. Melissa attributes her popularity at school to her mom. When you have the most popular teacher as your own mom, it makes being at school a lot easier. Melissa and the high school students are not the only learners who speak highly of Susan as an educator, the many people who she has mentored, advised and taught after leaving Vancouver, would also explain that Susan significantly contributed to their learning.



While Susan was teaching in the Vancouver area, her husband at the time was a RCMP (Royal Canadian Mounted Police) officer. He was deployed with the United Nations and stationed in the former Yugoslavia. It was 1992 and the fall of communism in Eastern Europe led to the breakup of this country. This also led to civil war within the country. With her husband deployed, Susan remained in Canada. However, she took the opportunity to travel with her children to safe areas or 'green areas,' as they were referred to within Yugoslavia. Her daughter, Melissa, recalls sitting on the roof of a house, in a safe area, watching the bombing in the distance and hearing the sounds of machine guns. One would think that this would be a terrifying experience, but once again, Susan and her family found a way to help others. They chose to hand out Christmas gifts to those in need. As a family, they made sure that those in need were provided for. Again, Susan made sure that the most vulnerable people in the community were being served and cared for.

While in Yugoslavia, Susan was aware of the lack of basic necessities that plagued the war-torn society. She wanted to know what they needed most and what she discovered was that they needed medicine. Getting medicine into a country in the depths of war was no easy task, but as always, Susan was determined that something needed to be done. When

she returned to Vancouver, her philanthropic attributes were once again sparked, and she was determined to help. She started talking with doctors and medicinal salespeople. She discovered that much of the medicine that was needed was thrown away the moment that they expired. However, medical experts assured her that the medicine was still good. Upon learning this, Susan started collecting expired medicine from many wonderful providers. She often opened her front door in the morning to see boxes of medicine quietly left by well-meaning providers and proceeded to make sure that the medicine got to those who needed it most.

After her visit to Yugoslavia, Susan returned to Vancouver and to her work as a teacher. However, she was also struggling as a mother because of the issues that were occurring in the area that she was working and living in. Drugs were becoming a problem in the high school, and this was something that she wanted to protect her own children from. Susan made the decision that she was going to relocate.

Susan's next journey would take her to Japan, where she would stay for the next ten years. Again, Susan was able to continue to develop her leadership abilities as she continued to reinvent herself. While at a private school in Japan, Susan would find a new niche as managing director of the chain of schools, where she would oversee both the business side and the educational components of the organization.

As quality education is of the utmost importance to Susan, she began exploring what opportunities may be available for herself and for her children. She looked to the University of Southern Queensland (USQ) in Australia for what it could offer she and her children. What she found was that this university provided a quality undergraduate degree through distance education. She also quickly discovered that the Japanese Yen went further in Australia than it did in Canada, so the choice seemed obvious. She and her children, Matt and Melissa, would pursue their education via this route. Susan would attain her Master's degree through USQ and later her daughter, Melissa, and son, Matthew, would follow in her footsteps and achieve their undergraduate degrees from USQ.

As Susan was nearing the end of her ten years in Japan, her desire to travel once again surfaced, and she took the opportunity to relocate to South Korea for work. Accompanying her, was her son, Matthew. Susan spent 14 months as Director of a Maple Bear School. As Director, she continued to refine her leadership skills. This position also provided her with the opportunity to deepen her understanding of early childhood education.

When the opportunity to travel to the United Arab Emirates was presented to Susan, she was once again on the move and onto a new adventure. Susan began teaching at The Higher Colleges of Technology. It was during her time in the UAE that she made the decision to begin her Doctorate, as she wanted to teach at university. Susan made the decision to study at Athabasca University. This university is physically located in Alberta, Canada; however, the structure of the university entices people from all over the world, as it is an open university whose delivery is completely online. Susan would continue teaching while working towards her doctoral degree.



Athabasca University requires that doctoral students participate in class work prior to beginning their dissertation. The university also expects that the dissertation will have online or distance attributes within the research. As Susan had spent most of her adult life either engaging in distance learning, or having her own children take their classes with this format, it was the perfect fit for her. Anyone who knows Susan understands that her work would also have a humanitarian aspect to it. As she has stated, she would like to see educational technology become the 'great equalizer,' and that all citizens of the world

would have access to the same knowledge and information. Therefore, her research set out to do just that.

As a doctoral student, Susan made the decision that her research would take her to Nepal. This choice would again take her on a humanitarian adventure and change the lives of many people. Susan's research topic was "development and evaluation of a pedagogical model for an open university in Nepal based on geographical, regional and linguistic factors."



The people of Nepal had just endured a civil war that lasted from 1996 to 2006. This caused many people to leave their villages and move to cities. Many Nepalese did not have computers or access to the internet, and were trying to recover from a war that divided their nation. The people of

Nepal were also divided by a Caste system, which made equal access to all Nepalese an almost insurmountable task.

First, the students needed to have access to computers. Susan set out to find 50 computers for the school that she was working with in Nepal. Getting the computers would be easy; it was getting them to Nepal and to the school where Susan needed to lean into her creative prowess. However, the computers could not just be sent to Nepal. She was warned that there were often thefts that occurred and that the computers might be stolen. Leaning into her ingenuity, Susan and friends started putting the word out around the Edmonton, Canada area and tapped the shoulders of many doctors who travelled to Nepal to climb Mount Everest. One by one, doctors arrived in Nepal carrying two computers each. The principal at the school would meet them and take the computers to the school. While this process was time-consuming, it did provide technology to the students.



Helping this Nepalese school to get computers was not the only philanthropic adventure that Susan would engage in during her time in Nepal. She would also change the life of a young Nepalese girl who was not high caste. The impact of that help would be felt in the next generation for this family.



While visiting at the government school, Susan found herself drawn to a young Nepalese girl who had a love for education and a desire to be a lawyer. Asmita was in grade 9 when she and Susan's paths crossed. Asmita recalls first meeting Susan and being drawn to her. She knew Susan was working to get computers into her school. The two would create a lasting relationship and, when Asmita was in Grade 12, she and Susan made plans for her future.

The war had been very hard on Asmita and her family. The family had to flee their village and seek refuge in Kathmandu. They were forced to leave everything behind. Asmita recalls that her family did not have the skills for the city. Her dad moved to Saudi Arabia to find work so that he could support the family, and her mom started cooking in a café. However, the family was still very poor and there would be no money for further education, which was this young girl's dream.

Asmita recalls her headmaster coming to see her one day and telling her that Susan wanted to help her. Susan knew her parents were struggling financially, and she also knew that this young lady wanted to pursue further education. Susan asked her, "What do you want to be?" Asmita wanted to either be a nurse or a lawyer. Susan told her she would help her

as much as possible. However, Asmita's mother wanted her to get married. Susan explained that she would talk with Asmita's mother and help this young lady pursue her educational dreams. Susan was true to her word. Not only did she help to convince the family that education was important, but she also committed to financially supporting Asmita. Her father's words must have resonated with Susan the day he gave that cheque to the Salvation Army.

Asmita did go to university and, as Susan promised, she supported Asmita through it. While Asmita is married now, she too is paying it forward. She helps her family financially. She said Susan inspired her and she wants to be just like her, and in many ways she is. Like Susan, Asmita is giving back. She is encouraging her family to pursue further education and she is helping her community by giving what she can. She knows the impact Susan has had on changing the course of her life.

Susan has made an impact on the lives of many people and continues to do so. After defending her dissertation in 2013, she began teaching with Athabasca University. As Melissa explained about her mom, the high school teacher, Susan's doctoral students reiterate the same sentiment many years later. Whether it be a student in her class, or a student she is mentoring in the doctoral or master's program, the opinion is that Susan makes learning come alive. She is there for her students and, although the learning is virtual, it is as if she is right in front of her students making sure that they enjoy learning.



Passing the Torch

When talking about her, students say that being a student of Susan's is a privilege. In fact, there is a collective gratitude amongst many of her doctoral students due to the extensive support she has provided them throughout the doctoral process. Her students describe her honesty and her ability to make them feel collectively that they can overcome any hurdles as two of her greatest attributes. As a teacher, she is approachable, has an amazing sense of humour, and is authentic. Bonnie, one of the students Susan mentored, stated that, "I am a better teacher because of Susan. She makes her students feel connected to her because she really listens and hears what we say."

Susan teaches virtually. She is a strong proponent of online education and believes that it has the capacity to equalize educational opportunities. While there are those who will adamantly state that online education does not have the same impact or create the same connections as face to face, they have not had Dr. Susan Bainbridge as their online instructor. Susan connects with her students. She is present in their learning, and she genuinely cares about them and their learning experiences

Although Susan has been an advisor for many doctoral students while working at Athabasca University, it was her student, Denise, who, like Asmita said, "I would love to do what Susan does." Denise describes Susan as an inspiration and someone who helps her students through hurdles. In fact, Denise credits her convocation to Susan. Many of her students do! Helping others to get through hurdles is a skill of Susan's. Whether it be helping to get computers to a school, helping to get medications to those in wore torn countries, or helping her doctoral students overcome their obstacles, Susan shows that there are no obstacles that cannot be tackled.

Susan is also a writer. While she has many blogs that can be read on the Internet, she is also a novelist. In 2010, Susan wrote the novel, *Hoarfrost and Cherry Blossoms*. The novel is set in Northern Canada. While this book draws on many of her own experiences when living in isolation, it illustrates Susan's ability to captivate the audience with humour, even when the main character is facing tenuous circumstances.

Susan is co-author of *The Encyclopedia of Female Pioneers in Online Learning*. This book highlights 30 women who have made significant contributions to online learning. As an advocate for women and their voices, this book showcases the importance of these pioneers' contributions. Susan makes a point of noting that she does not work toward equality of the sexes, but towards equity. She emphasizes that this is an important point. Many men have helped her throughout her life. She has never experienced men treating her poorly or hindering her progress. Susan believes "No human being is born equal to any other on earth. We cannot aim for equality; it is a fallacy. We to work toward equity for all people."

Dr. Susan Bainbridge is an amazing woman. Her friends will say that, although she is not a Rockefeller, she is a true philanthropist. This is evident by all that she has accomplished through her advocacy for the most vulnerable in society. Her children are so proud of her and call her their "rock." Her students say that she is inspiring and uplifting. She can get them through any hurdle that they may experience. Susan truly listens. Susan is a novelist, a teacher, a friend. Susan is a mentor and she is a humanitarian. Susan is many things to many people. While she may have wanted to be a lawyer when she finished school, there are many people who are certainly glad that her mother won that argument so many years ago.

SOURCES:

Interviews carried out August and September 2023 with: Bonnie Marlow, Denise MacIver, Asmita Gurung, Melissa Serena, and Susan Bainbridge.

Images: Susan Bainbridge

BIODATA and CONTACT ADDRESS of the AUTHOR



Dr. Katherine LEBLANC a life-long educator. She was a recipient of the 2019 Canada's Top Principal award. She also earned a recognition award from the Canadian Association for Teacher Education (CATE) in 2023 for her dissertation. Katherine's Doctor of Education in Distance Education (2023) and Master of Education in Distance Education (2017) were obtained from Athabasca University. Her Bachelor of Education (1990) came from the University of Regina. Katherine has worked in elementary and secondary education as a teacher and a principal, and as a Superintendent of Schools

in Saskatchewan and Nunavut, Canada. She also does sessional work with the University of Prince Edward Island, teaching in their master's program.

LeBlanc, Katherine
Ministry of Education, Government of Saskatchewan
Address: 409A Park Street
Regina, Saskatchewan, Canada S4N 5B2
Phone: 1-306-787-6930
E-mail: kleblanc2@learn.athabascau.ca