

Living

TAKE THE LEAP

The benefit of embracing risk is a favourite topic for researchers, and so is the stereotype that women don't do it enough. But we *can* be risk-takers, and here are four women who prove it.

BY STACY LEE KONG



onventional wisdom says women avoid risk at all costs—we don't tend to invest, take chances at work or flock to extreme sports.

But the conversation is actually much more complicated. For starters, women *do* take risks—just not always in the same way as men. Traditionally, what counts as risky behaviour is what the now-retired psychologist Marvin Zuckerman calls “sensation-seeking”—when people crave a rush from mental or physical stimulation. Sensation seekers dislike boredom and search out new experiences, which is why you'll find them skydiving or playing the stock market.

But the definition of risk is broader than that. In her 2016 book, *The Art of Risk: The New Science of Courage, Caution and Chance*, American author Kayt Sukel cites a review of literature that found women take tons of risks. “They just don't tend to go all in when it comes to...monetary gambles,” she writes. “Where you'll see women showing a good bit of risky behaviour is the social arena, which may be a place they feel more comfortable taking on uncertainty.... Women are much more likely to bring up an unpopular issue with a group or even change careers later in life than men are—things that are fairly risky when you thoroughly consider them.”

And, for the record, even when it comes to traditional risks, the gender difference may not be as fixed as previous studies would suggest. A 2012 review of literature by University of Massachusetts Boston economics professor Julie A. Nelson found that, despite the perception women are more risk-averse, there was actually a lot of overlap between men's and women's behaviour. It was simply masked by researchers' confirmation bias. (They expected a difference, so they saw one.)

That's why it's worth thinking about social pressure. If conventional wisdom says extreme sports aren't ladylike or girls aren't good at math, it's no surprise that we might avoid these endeavours. But the rising numbers of female athletes, entrepreneurs and investors support the idea that at least part of what makes us risk-averse is nurture, not nature.

We spoke to four women who exemplify that risk-taking ethos. Here's what they had to say about not letting fear get in the way, overcoming obstacles and the long-term benefits of taking chances.



Kirstine Stewart

THE INNOVATOR



Kirstine Stewart has gone from media exec to tech star, but her most recent career move scared her the most: leaving one job without having another lined up.

After two years as vice-president of media for Twitter (and three years as head of Twitter Canada before that), Kirstine Stewart was feeling what she sometimes describes as a “knock, knock, knock”—a sense that, as awesome as her job was, it would soon be time to find something else.

She'd had the itch before, most recently as an executive vice-president of CBC. The first woman and youngest person to oversee English services, Kirstine left the broadcaster for the Twitter gig. Before that, she was in another top job at CBC, and previously had senior posts at Alliance Atlantis and the Hallmark Channel—all for around three years. Clearly, she had a pattern. But this time was different: Kirstine had no idea what her next position would be when she gave her notice.

“Even though I have this reputation of being a risk-taker, I have also made sure my next step was evident to me before I left,” she says. “That had a lot to do with the industry I chose to be in. In media, there aren't a lot of jobs, particularly those more senior positions. So moving from Alliance Atlantis [to CBC], for example, or from CBC to Twitter—those look like big, risky moves, and in a lot of ways they were, but I knew what I was going to do next.”

When she stepped down from Twitter, Kirstine was inspired by peers there and in the tech world who opted to leave jobs without having something else in the wings. They were eventually offered interesting, exciting and surprising opportunities they might not have pursued on their own.

And she was prepared. “I knew I wanted to do this, so I actually saved up for it—just in case,” says Kirstine. “And it did take until this part of my career to be able to afford to do it. Like a lot of people, I work paycheque to paycheque—there is no trust fund waiting for me.”

The risk paid off: After fewer than six weeks of unemployment, she signed on as chief strategy officer with Diply, an under-the-radar media company that aggregates shareable content (think list-style articles, viral videos and inspirational/tear-jerking stories).

“I ended up at a company I didn't even know existed—I had to Google them when they contacted me! But they're an amazing company looking for that next stage of growth,” she says.

The experience has affirmed Kirstine's view on taking chances. “You need to take risks because they aren't really risks, they're actually decisions you make about where you want to go next,” she says. “They might not be predictable and they might not be safe, but at the same time, you're taking a bit of control—you're the one making that decision; you're not waiting for someone else to.”

This approach is particularly useful for women, people of colour and other minorities; we might not read as stereotypical leaders, but Kirstine thinks that might be our greatest opportunity. “I find that people who are very set in their careers don't want to take risks because of the reputation costs. But for people who maybe have a harder time than traditional leaders getting ahead, then it's the way to forge a different path.”



Janice Larocque

THE VISIONARY



When people told Janice Larocque her dream of opening a new type of staffing agency was doomed to fail, she used it as inspiration to work harder. Nineteen years later, she's more than proved them wrong.

Janice Larocque has always liked a challenge. “When I look back, my first office job was for a company that was newly developed, and I was responsible for setting it up and had no clue how!” she says. “I had to put payroll in place, order the office supplies and work with all the sales reps—and I was fresh from [working at] A&W.”

Yet, the gig taught her what she needed to know about running an office. That knowledge came in handy in 1998 when she started Spirit Staffing and Consulting, a job-placement agency aimed at connecting Indigenous peoples and others traditionally underrepresented in Alberta’s workforce with jobs.

That year, while on staff at an Indigenous employment and training centre in Calgary, Janice—a single mother—was tasked with encouraging local companies to hire the agency’s clients. But having worked there for nearly a decade, Janice knew this approach wasn’t very effective. Instead, she saw an opportunity: start her own agency and establish connections with small business and multinational companies that used staffing agencies to supply temporary workers, then send them résumés from individuals who were, for whatever reason, not being fairly considered. That included Indigenous peoples, people of colour and even those from other provinces. “Workers from Newfoundland often found it difficult to get consideration for a job because of their strong accents,” says Janice. “But once I got their résumés to the table, they were able to get employment opportunities.”

It was a bold, and clearly necessary, idea—not least because Alberta was in the middle of a recession, which Janice didn’t realize at first. But discouragingly, few people believed she could make Spirit Staffing work, including bankers,

who weren’t willing to loan her the money she needed to grow.

“I didn’t have a lot of equity, so I went to the mainstream banks and, of course, they wouldn’t even consider loans,” she says. “But I was lucky because the Alberta Women Entrepreneurs [a not-for-profit aimed at helping women build successful businesses] believed in my dream, and they gave me five loans.”

Even after she secured the funds and made her payments on time, banks still didn’t trust her; when she opened her first business account, the bank manager approved a \$15,000 line of credit—but held \$10,000 as collateral. The funds

were released only three years ago.

“They held [the credit line] captive for 15 years,” she says. “That’s how much faith they had in me. But I think it just made me work harder.”

Janice’s dedication has paid off. The company now has four divisions: office and administration, industrial, certified safety training and Indigenous specialty projects (for organizations doing work on First Nations land), plus a second branch in Edmonton, which is run by Janice’s sister Beatrice.

And she and the banks get along just fine now, says Janice. “Things have changed—we’re working with some of the largest companies in Canada to help with [the aftermath of] the Fort McMurray fire. We’re responsible for making sure up to 500 people get their paycheques, and we secured financing [so] we could pay them. I was able to borrow a million dollars! [The bank was] willing to work with me, which was probably the most satisfying thing to happen in years.”

It’s no surprise that Janice is often lauded for her hard work and business acumen. Spirit Staffing is owned entirely by Indigenous women (Janice is Métis), and in 2015, the company was recognized by the Council for the Advancement of Native Development Officers, the Calgary Chamber of Commerce and the Canadian Aboriginal and Minority Supplier Council. That year, Janice was also awarded the Telus Trailblazer Award at the RBC Canadian Women Entrepreneur Awards, which are presented by Women of Influence.

But perhaps the most rewarding accolade is the company’s enduring success—even now, during another rough patch in Alberta’s economy, Spirit Staffing is holding strong, something Janice credits to the relationships she’s spent many years building. ◉

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Lindsay Anderson

&

Dana VanVeller

THE ADVENTURERS

It seems like something you'd read about or watch on TV: Two young women with a desire to learn more about their country's food traditions pack up and drive coast-to-coast, meeting farmers and home cooks and tasting local delicacies. But for Vancouver residents Dana VanVeller and Lindsay Anderson, this wasn't a book or a TV show (at least not yet!). It was real life.

The duo, who met through Lindsay's ex-boyfriend, bonded over their love of food. While "lounging on a log in the sunshine" during a weekend camping trip, she says, they started talking about how Canadians don't do enough to celebrate our unique cuisine. They wondered what it would be like to explore each province and territory's food culture—and their fun what-if soon turned into a serious plan.

"We were both at this interesting point in our lives," says Lindsay. "Dana had a job she liked but had been at it for a while, and she felt like she didn't have a ton more learning to do. And I had just finished a big writing contract with Tourism Richmond that had been great but exhausting. We were in our late 20s and unattached, and had no mortgages or kids, so we were in a position to go off and have this adventure."

They started meeting up after work, spending hours in coffee shops plotting their hypothetical trip: how long they'd be away (they initially intended to finish in four months but ended up needing five), where they would go (all 10 provinces, all three territories) and, most importantly, how they'd pay for the ambitious journey (a combo of personal savings, fundraising and help from regional tourism boards).

Dropping \$20 on a domain name made it real. "Neither of us is the type of person who would casually buy a domain name. It had come to the point where we had put in enough



Passionate about exploring regional cuisine, Lindsay Anderson (left) and Dana VanVeller ditched their jobs to take the Canadian foodie road trip of a lifetime, blogging about it along the way.

work, and we were, like, 'OK, let's do this!'" says Dana.

"We didn't really know what we were doing, but we kept putting one foot in front of the other. It kept getting bigger and scarier, to the point where we started [thinking], Are we totally nuts? What have we got ourselves into? But we just kept going," says Lindsay.

They set off in June 2013; one early highlight was a kayaking expedition around Spring Island, a remote but stunning spot off the northwest coast of Vancouver Island. Afterward, they participated in a traditional salmon feast prepared by members of the Kuuquot First Nations community, in which the fish is filleted, then threaded through cedar slats and propped up near a campfire to roast. From there, they toured the rest of B.C., the Yukon, the Northwest Territories and Alberta, before heading east across the country. The pair drove home through the U.S., detouring to visit Churchill, Man., before finally flying to Rankin Inlet, Nunavut, to cap off the trip.

Along the way, they learned a lot about Canadian food. "It's hugely influenced by First Nations peoples, it's influenced by immigrants, it's influenced by the landscape, by the season, by trends—so the best way to celebrate it is to [honour] its diversity,

be open to learning about all of it and not worry about trying to tidily collect it into one cohesive thought. And that is sort of how we feel about Canada, too," says Lindsay.

And their takeaway clearly resonated; the pair documented the journey on their blog, *Feast: An Edible Road Trip*, and each post garnered so much interest that, upon their return, Dana and Lindsay wondered if they could turn the experience into a book. Before the trip, they probably wouldn't have been so ambitious, but going on this adventure changed how they approach their goals.

"We now think way bigger than we did before. You might as well go big and try for the craziest thing; even if it doesn't happen, you still learn something in the process and maybe you land on something that's not quite as big but still amazing," says Lindsay. "The reason we have a book now is because of this attitude. How could it hurt to write the book proposal? The worst they could say is 'no,' and [in the process] we learned [something]."

Fortunately, the proposal was accepted. A cookbook based on their adventures comes out this month, and they will soon be on the road again for their first book tour.

"Risk builds your skill set for facing hard things," says Dana. "You have more confidence and more experience in how to make something work or how to handle unforeseen problems." ●



Feast: Recipes and Stories From a Canadian Road Trip, based on Dana and Lindsay's cross-country tour, is on sale this month.