

Seizing opportunity: C.B.-born executive makes most of Trump meeting

By LYNN SAWYER

Few people have the ear of the president of the United States – even for a minute. But a self-made woman from Cape Breton can now count herself among them.

Annette Verschuren, chancellor of Cape Breton University, captivated a sold-out crowd of 360 people at an International Women's Day celebration in Halifax this past week with the tale of her encounter with Donald Trump last month. Verschuren, it seems, has been living this year's Be Bold For Change theme of the International Women's Forum.

True to her roots, she opened her keynote address in a down-home Cape Breton manner, as though she were sharing news with a friend over coffee.

"First, I'd like to tell you about my little trip to Washington," she said.

The former CEO of Home Depot Canada, who is now an energy-storage entrepreneur, sat at the Trudeau-Trump roundtable at the White House on Feb. 13 as part of the international team launching the joint Canada-United States initiative advancing women leaders and entrepreneurs in business.

Verschuren said that "the initiative was spearheaded by Prime Minister (Justin) Trudeau," who was "enormously influenced by his chief of staff, Katie Telford, who's a brilliant woman."

The Canadian Press has reported it was Telford's idea, citing a senior Canadian government source.

"The idea was, let's move on an issue that Canada and the United States would not have controversy with," said Verschuren.

They were sitting around the table. The media came in. "There were a thousand pictures taken. It was unbelievable," said Verschuren.



Annette Verschuren signs copies of her book at an International Women's Day event in Halifax last week. (LANE FARGUSON)

They talked about the advancement of women and about encouraging girls to go into math and science.

As chair and CEO of NRStor Inc., she said, "I see this myself. I'm in the energy-storage business. I'm looking for engineers and science people, and there's just not enough women."

"We had an opportunity to talk about our economies. Part of the advancement of our economy has to do with the advancement of talent in our countries. We talked about women and trade. It was a really practical, wonderful discussion," said Verschuren, who is co-chair of the Canadian Smart Prosperity Initiative.

Deborah Gillis, another Cape Bretoner and the first non-American CEO of New York based Catalyst Inc., was also there, Verschuren pointed out.

"Two women from Nova Scotia – isn't that amazing?" she added.

"The prime minister and the president generally wanted to

listen to what we had to say,” said Verschuren.

Encouraged by how well the meeting went, she had a moment alone at the end with President Trump.

“MR. PRESIDENT, YOU KNOW WHY YOUR DAUGHTER IS SO SUCCESSFUL?” SHE SAID TO HIM. “BECAUSE YOU DIDN’T TREAT HER ANY DIFFERENT THAN YOUR SONS. YOU ENCOURAGED HER. YOU INSPIRED HER. CAN YOU IMAGINE IF THE CEOs OF CANADA AND THE UNITED STATES DID THAT? CAN YOU IMAGINE HOW MUCH BETTER THE COMPANIES WOULD BE RUN AND THE COUNTRIES WOULD BE RUN IF WE GOT MORE WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP POSITIONS?”

She added, “Why don’t you, the next time you meet with the CEOs, ask those CEOs what they’re doing to advance women in their companies? It can really make a difference.”

“Not a bad idea,” said Trump.

The way Verschuren spoke to Trump resonated with provincial Immigration Minister Lena Diab.

“Don’t be afraid of power. Don’t be afraid of making money. Building confidence, you know, once you achieve that and you have confidence, telling Trump what she did, it just comes naturally,” Diab said in an interview.

Where were the seeds of confidence planted for Verschuren? When it came to farm chores, her father showed no gender preference. After her dad had a serious heart attack and her mother was left at home with five children under 14, she and her siblings had to pitch in to run the farm.

Triumph over adversity early in life developed into calm self-assurance over time.

Verschuren quoted a recent report by executive recruitment firm Rosenzweig & Company that says 91 per cent of the top jobs in Canada are held by men and just nine per cent by women. “These numbers are not good enough,” she said. “We have to do more.”

She earned her success — beginning in the milking stalls at her family farm and eventually rising to the highest corridors of corporate power.

“It is important that we take time to share our stories and experiences, and celebrate our successes, and there is no better person to learn from than Annette Verschuren,” Karen Oldfield, national president of IWF Canada, said in an email.

Verschuren is not a believer in profits at all costs. By 2002, according to her book, Home Depot had committed to eliminating wood purchases from regions in the world with endangered forests.

She explains in her book why a person’s network is his or her net worth and she gives credit to all those who helped her along the way.

As guest speaker of the 2017 IWF-hosted International Women’s Day breakfast in Halifax, it was her choice to direct the substantial profits from ticket sales to the Verschuren Centre for Sustainability at Cape Breton University.

A community builder who will never forget her roots, Verschuren leaves women with the feeling that if she can go from, citing her childhood nickname, “Poopie from Cape Breton to the wilds of Bay Street,” they can, too.