

A hand is shown reaching upwards, palm facing forward, against a background of various data visualizations including bar charts, line graphs, and a grid. The background has a warm, golden glow. The quote is overlaid on a red rectangular box.

“DON'T LET YOUR CIRCUMSTANCES DICTATE YOUR FUTURE”

IMAGINE WORKING YOUR WAY UP FROM A BROKEN HOME TO A PLUSH JOB AT SALESFORCE; OR EXPERIENCING DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND BECOMING A RESEARCHER IN A TOP-FLIGHT UNIVERSITY; OR LIVING IN FOSTER CARE AND DESIGNING AN AWARD-WINNING MENTAL HEALTH APP. DOINA ONCEL HAS OVERCOME HUGE CHALLENGES TO BECOME FOUNDER AND CEO OF hEr VOLUTION, AND SHE'S ON A MISSION TO HELP GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN FROM DIVERSE BACKGROUNDS SEE THEIR FUTURE IN STEM

WHY DID YOU SET UP hEr VOLUTION?

I come from a social work background and have worked with people from underserved communities, in particular, Toronto in Canada. I've also needed to access homelessness, domestic violence, poverty and immigration services. When I learned about the lack of women in STEM, it made perfect sense to me that there should be an organisation that brings diversity to the sector – people who would love to access opportunities in STEM but face multiple barriers, or who aren't even aware that these opportunities exist. In Canada, the STEM sector is not diverse. People with money or from more elite backgrounds tend to work in STEM so, at hEr VOLUTION, we aim to change that.

hEr VOLUTION SUPPORTS WOMEN FROM UNDERSERVED COMMUNITIES, IN PARTICULAR. WHAT KINDS OF BARRIERS DO THESE WOMEN HAVE TO OVERCOME?

Some of the barriers that women from the underserved community face are: not having enough money to pay for education; not having an income for their kids; not being aware of opportunities or the skills needed for the future. We've discovered that the skills required in the next 10-15 years, in order to get a job, are in STEM. A lot of the people from underserved communities aren't equipped for any form of employment, and so they'll continue to be underserved.

WHY ARE YOU ENCOURAGING YOUNG WOMEN TO STUDY AND FOLLOW CAREERS IN STEM?

STEM careers are better paid, the careers of the future are STEM-based and if we want to prepare women for the future, then we have to look to STEM. Let me use my eldest daughter as an example. She's 16 and she's really good at art. She wants to be an illustrator or animator and she's looking at colleges and universities. Illustration and animation might be her passion, but I tell her to think beyond that. If she has a computer science degree, she can take animation and illustration to the next level. She'll have more opportunities open to her than with a degree in animation – even as an animator – because anything she works on will require her to use a computer. If you want a solid career it's always a good idea to be ahead of the game.



ABOUT DOINA ONCEL

Doina faced multiple barriers during her lifetime, including domestic violence and homelessness. A single mother of two daughters, she now heads hEr VOLUTION, an organisation that aims to revolutionise the STEM industry.



ABOUT hEr VOLUTION

Based in Toronto, Canada, hEr VOLUTION provides opportunities for young women, especially those from underserved communities, to access careers in STEM (science, tech, engineering and maths) through workshops, seminars, education and career programmes, conferences and events.

www.hervolution.org

WHAT RESOURCES DO YOU OFFER GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN?

We organise educational programmes and events. For example, we have a high school computer science programme and other similar programmes focusing on space science, tech, coding, engineering, etc.

Just under half of our attendees at our end-of-year conference are high school and post-secondary students. Our STEM conferences are different to other STEM conferences in that we talk about challenges and how to overcome those challenges. We also connect young women with STEM opportunities and mentorships.

WHAT AGE GROUP ARE YOU TARGETING?

Our programmes are aimed at girls in grade 1 to grade 12. A lot of statistics suggest that by the time they reach 12 years old, they will have already decided whether or not STEM is for them. We want to show them that STEM isn't just for nerds, which is why we have a webpage dedicated to Canadian women in STEM. These women act as STEM role models and mentors for young women.

ARE THESE RESOURCES OPEN TO ALL GIRLS AND WOMEN WORLDWIDE?

At the moment we serve Ontario, but we're working on serving the whole of Canada. We've been in existence for six years and we're in the process of creating a solid foundation and understanding of the barriers before multiplying our programmes across the country.

We also offer volunteering opportunities to women outside of Canada so that they can get the experience they need to live in Canada. This experience doesn't necessarily have to be in STEM; we offer experience in marketing, PR, whatever, and we've had graphic designers from Netherlands, Australia and India.

WHAT DOES "UNDERSERVED" MEAN?

WOMEN FROM "UNDERSERVED COMMUNITIES" ARE UNABLE TO ACCESS VITAL SERVICES, FROM HEALTHCARE TO THE INTERNET.



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YOU WORK WITH A LOT OF PARTNERS, INCLUDING SHOPIFY, SALESFORCE, THE SOCIETY OF WOMEN ENGINEERS.... IN WHAT WAY DO THESE PARTNERS WORK WITH YOU?

One way to get young women excited about STEM is to give them first-hand experience in a company. For example, Salesforce or Shopify offer young women exposure to work experience, which means they really get to see what it's like to work there. We started this idea a couple of years ago and we've found that a lot more women pursue STEM careers in this way than when we only give talks or presentations.

ON YOUR WEBSITE, YOU ARE DESCRIBED AS AN IMMIGRANT WHO HAS EXPERIENCED HOMELESSNESS, DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND MANY OTHER DIFFICULT CIRCUMSTANCES. WHO OR WHAT CHANGED YOUR CIRCUMSTANCES TO ALLOW YOU TO BECOME THE INSPIRATIONAL PERSON YOU ARE TODAY?

When people call me inspirational, I always think, why, what have I done?! Yes, I was an immigrant with no resources, no social network and a low income. I was 19 when I moved to Canada from Romania and I couldn't speak the language. I had to go to shelters quite a few times, I slept on people's floors – it was tough. I also have two daughters who are a huge inspiration for me.

To be honest, my eldest daughter was only 7 years old when I was last in a shelter and experienced violence. At that time, she said to me: "When I grow up, I want to be just like you." I thought to myself, what am I showing her? If I become a better person then she'll aspire to become a better person, but if I stay here, in my victim zone, she's never going to aspire to anything more, so I decided I needed to lead by example. That was a huge turning point for me.

WHAT MESSAGE DO YOU HAVE FOR GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN FROM UNDERSERVED COMMUNITIES?

Don't let your current circumstances dictate your future. Surround yourself with the right people – people who want the best for you, lift you up, push you to do the things you're supposed to be doing and help you find yourself.

It wasn't until later in my life that I discovered that it's up to me to decide what my future looks like. I get to design my life. When you realise that you have the power to design your life, you can do anything. Imagine if money wasn't an issue, or if you didn't have any barriers, what would you want to do? Focus on that every time you have to make a decision.

A few years ago, I wrote a question on a piece of paper and put it on a wall by my desk, and I looked at it every single day. Every time I felt I couldn't do something or couldn't carry on, I looked at that question. The question was this: what is the future asking me to become? When I looked at that question, I couldn't be sad or upset; I couldn't let my current situation dictate my future. I have to look at my future and focus on that. The next question I have to ask myself is how do I make that happen?