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SHINE BOOTCAMP GIVES WOMEN A VOICE IN THE PUBLIC SPEAKING REALM

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by Natalie Bruckner

STANDING on top of Whistler mountain, Stefanie Grieser, BCom '12, straps on her skis and launches herself down the mountain, carving her mark in the fresh snow. The Colorado-native knows that out here, on nature's stage, everyone is equal. Mother Nature doesn't discriminate: your ability, skill and experience define you.

It seemed a “no brainer” then that Grieser, co-creator of the public speaking workshop Shine Bootcamp, would take her learnings from the wild and apply them to her professional life to create a level playing field in the public speaking realm.

“I wouldn't classify myself as a professional public speaker; not many women do,” says Grieser, who launched the speaker bootcamp three years ago. “Women can be thought-leaders and still lack the confidence to raise their hands to speak. When it comes to conferences, there is a gender imbalance, and the bootcamp was launched to address that.”

According to a 2018 study by software company Bizzabo, men make up 68 per cent of speakers at conferences, trade shows and marketing events. It wasn't until Grieser joined the software company Unbounce in 2012, after completing Gustavson's entrepreneurship program, that she realized the size of the problem.

“I joined Unbounce when it was a start-up, as their second marketer. The company was growing quickly and I decided to pitch our CEO on starting our offline marketing initiatives and channels. I ended up building out our flagship Call To Action Conference from scratch.”

While Grieser says the inaugural conference was a success, when she looked back at the speaker line-up (consisting of eight male and two female speakers), a lightbulb went off. “It just didn't sit well with me.”

Grieser made it her mission to get more women on stage — not a simple task.

“At first I thought there weren't enough qualified female speakers, but what it came down to was I wasn't trying hard enough to find them.”

Her own stint at public speaking gave her additional insight, and an understanding of the importance of coaching.

“I did some public speaking at university, but nothing beyond that. So when I decided to speak at the Unbounce conference in front of 1,000 people, I reached out to one of

the founders who is a keynote speaker and got him to coach me.”

Grieser admits she was nervous and doubted her ability. “I didn't think I was qualified to be on stage with all these other professionals.”

In fact, Grieser ended up with a Top 10 speaker rating at the conference.

She went on to write a blog post about her experience with diversity at conferences as both a conference organizer and speaker, and it went viral. Instead of just talking about the problem, however, she wanted to take action, and Shine Bootcamp was born.

That first year, Shine received more than 40 applications for the 15 slots. Participants were required to attend online workshops in the run-up to the three-day bootcamp to be sure their presentations were completed. This ensured that during the event participants could receive one-on-one coaching and end up with a polished presentation, which could be recorded and used to pitch to other event organizers. “It was a big success. The buzz just spread from there.”

Despite increasing demand, Grieser wants to grow the business modestly, keep the quality of the programs high and focus on diversity beyond just women. Shine wants to provide a platform for others who are underrepresented and aims to make space for the LGBTQIA+ community, persons with disabilities and people of colour.

“Perhaps in coming years Shine will become bigger, maybe even a franchise,” says Grieser. For now, she sees it as a passion project, undertaken alongside her role as director of growth at Sphere, a technology start-up that is shaking up the coaching space.

Grieser credits her time at UVic for giving her even more of a global mindset. “Gustavson truly aligned with how I think and how I was raised. I got the chance to study in Istanbul, Turkey, as part of the exchange program, and work at some big companies during my co-op that made me realize my passion lay with start-ups. It offered me a range of transferable business skills,” she says.

As for advice for anyone thinking they could never be a public speaker, she says, “As long as you have a story and are an expert in your field, you can do it. I don't think you ever stop being nervous, but with the right tools and support, you will feel the confidence to raise your hand alongside everyone else.” ■

Photo: Don Denton