

# Makingwaves

**LadiesoftheLakeusesocial capitalanddiverseskillstoeffect anenvironmentalsechange**

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**BY MAUREEN LITTLEJOHN**

Paddling up the Maskinonge River one sunny fall afternoon, five years ago, friends Annabel Slight and Jane Meredith noticed that the route was becoming more and more clogged. Massive tangles of weeds and green algae were choking the once-pristine waterway flowing into Lake Simcoe. It was the same goop they'd noticed washing ashore near their homes by the lake. Slight snapped a photo of her friend, holding a paddle in one hand, her nose with the other.

"We remembered [how we used to drink] that water," says Slight, 69, founder of OWL magazine and OWL TV. "Both Jane and I have spent our whole lives on the lake, and the weeds we saw that day were disgusting. The quality of the lake had deteriorated and the politicians didn't seem to care. People felt hopeless. We said to each other, 'We need to do something.' Our eureka moment was born of frustration more than anything else."

Ladies of the Lake emerged in 2004—a grassroots movement that grew from 40 friends meeting in Meredith's living room to a high-profile lobby group with a core of 100 women aged 30 to 80. They've since garnered hundreds more community supporters, both men and women, from businesses, associations and ecology groups.

Within five years, the Ladies have affected seismic change. Their door-to-door campaign awoke cottagers to the importance of shoreline protection and the fact that phosphorous in fertilizers contributes to weed proliferation. An action plan was drawn up with contributions from more than 300 local participants, and events were staged in the region to raise awareness. Trips were made to Queen's Park and politicians started listening. The federal government has pledged \$30 million in funding to clean up the lake, and last year the Ontario government passed the Lake Simcoe Protection Act.

This past summer the Ladies organized a mobile filmmaking project—WASTE (We Are Saving The Environment)—involving local teens to produce films about saving the lake and changing societal views about the environment. On October 1st, a geo-cache contest will lead participants to clues about those films, which will then be uploaded online for public viewing. Also scheduled for the fall is a youth conference titled "Where Waters Meet," to be held in the area.

The Ladies offer an inspiring lesson in the power of positive thinking. Their mandate: Work towards change and have fun doing it. "We are not political or against things," explains Slight. "We want change that benefits everybody."



ConservingLakeSimcoeanditswatershedistheaim ofanenvironmentalactivist groupcalledLadiesoftheLake

## 6 ways to put your plan into action

- Don't be intimidated.
- Seek advice from the best experts you can find.
- Engage event participants in active learning projects.
- Involve other groups in your events and/or pledge them a percentage of your fundraising.
- Be positive.
- Have fun

They started with the bare minimum, literally, in fundraising—a nude calendar of themselves, tastefully shot beside their beloved lake. The project raised more than \$250,000 and catapulted the group into the public eye. “It really opened doors for meeting with politicians,” says Meredith, 64, whose background includes volunteering for Bloorview Kids Rehab and a therapeutic riding program for disabled people. She adds, laughing, “They were falling all over each other trying to have their pictures taken with us.”

The secret to the Ladies’ success is their membership of diverse, passionate women. “I jumped at the chance to join an action-oriented organization,” says psychologist Goody Gerner, 62, the group’s president and founder of Toronto-based Generations Research. “We all bring different skills to the table. Much of what we do is based on research; that’s my background. Our current projects are about youth effecting change. What we are addressing is a local problem, but it’s also a microcosm of what’s happening in the world. It’s important to keep the environment healthy for future generations.”

And how does one go about implementing change? Says Slaight, who says Ladies of the Lake successfully tapped the minds of powerhouses, including Heather Reisman, CEO of book chains Chapters and Indigo: “Just do it. Don’t think too deeply. Young people have that ‘go for it’ attitude; older people tend to think too much. We didn’t know anything about marketing a calendar, but we did know how to ask for help.”

Adds Gerner, “If 100 women can make a significant difference on one small lake,...anybody can make change happen. The journey begins with a single step.”

Or a paddle full of weeds, hope and a lot of determination.

For more information, call 905-473-3742 or email [lakeladies.ca](mailto:lakeladies.ca) or [wastefilms.ca](http://wastefilms.ca)