



*June 23, 2015*

### **Remarks from Outgoing President Catherine Matheson at OMSSA's 2015 Learning Symposium & AGM**

I love the theme for tonight's Awards Gala – the 20s, such a long, long time ago. And of course, the 65th celebration of OMSSA – how fitting, stories reflections and hope for the future.

I'd like to begin by not only valuing the past, but by assessing today and making plans for tomorrow. One of my most puzzling thoughts is the concept of discrimination and oppression. We know the history of these elements and the impact they have had on human lives – and here we are in Chatham-Kent, a community that was a safe place, a brave place and home to those who escaped oppression.

My sobering thought around oppression and discrimination is that it still exists today, and harm continues to occur to some of our most vulnerable populations including the homeless and those with mental health challenges and addictions.

Despite our best efforts, our systems today continue to present barriers, and as a result, individuals continue to live without shelter, without food, and without emotional support. They continue to suffer from oppression and discrimination.

While we offer programs and services around these issues, we have not resolved them. Sometimes we get distracted with day-to-day work, processes and structures. We must not lose focus on the priorities, on the real work that will break barriers, silos and present opportunities for system change.

Our work is not yet done. The policies are not yet integrated, not progressive enough to take on those barriers. Unfortunately, we can get caught up in complicated solutions and sometimes we are looking far to hard.

For the first time in a very long time, the climate is changing at all levels. While it may be through austerity that this opportunity presents, it doesn't matter – the doors are open, the Province is listening, we have corporate partners, and there is opportunity for change.

The RCE model, community mobilization and influence is a vehicle for that change. I encourage you to embrace it, unleash it and follow it to the solutions that are local and creative, and that are so influential they cannot be ignored.

A year ago I stood before you in Sudbury welcoming you as incoming President to our northern community – a city I am very proud of. We had our slag pour, the barbecue at our lake, and the gala in our rock cave. It was our pleasure to host you, and this year Chatham-Kent has had the opportunity to showcase their community. We have all come to know your part of the province, and appreciate your warm welcoming hospitality and the history of decades gone by, but not forgotten.

We at OMSSA heard your message at the World Café last June to inspire health and well-being at the local level, and to work collectively on the four economic risk factors: income disparity; un- and under-employment; food security; and climate change to determine action. So yes, system change and cultural change is happening, through building upon the expertise of all of you and your community leadership tables, and through the leadership you have with your boards and councils.

Now, with the year complete, and Keith Palmer taking over as President, I'm anxious to focus on my new employment role at the LHIN, with a goal of undertaking system changes in health, with the strongest of ties to human services, to the needs of the vulnerable, to the sensitivity of our cultures and for the aim of improving the social determinants of health and wellbeing of all citizens. It is my hope that this work will bring strong partnerships to OMSSA via that new connection.

So yes, it is good to reflect, most certainly not to remember the past but to influence the future. There is the saying "be careful what you wish for." I would like to add to that. Yes, be careful what you wish for, but most importantly be ready for the change. Be prepared, be open and take control of the future, as the other saying is "opportunities come, but they also go in a flash."

So, my parting words as now Past President are: be strong, be prepared and influence the future, as in the absence of leadership is reaction, and in reaction – chaos. Neither will serve the needs of the most vulnerable in a way that could improve the human lot.

In closing, I'm most pleased to turn the presidency over to Keith Palmer. We joined the board together, and he will be the first President with a two-year term. He has a keen eye for detail, high political acuity a passion for learning organizations and excellent leadership skills.