



Sheila Pither

The COSCO Years



Upon retirement Sheila joined COSCO in 1999. She became the treasurer and joined a leadership team that accomplished amazing programs and advocacy for seniors in BC. Although Sheila worked with different teams over the years Sheila has always been the heart and soul of the project. Her leadership and mentoring made COSCO the organization it is today.

Sheila was able to present her ideas and gather people around her to make those ideas a reality. The following is a list of activities that Sheila shaped into the organization that COSCO is today.

COSCO HEALTH AND WELLNESS INSTITUTE

The Health and Wellness Institute, the education arm of COSCO, was initiated and developed by Sheila and a small group of seniors in 2007 with a free workshop on Falls Prevention. Today the Institute has over 40 different workshops that are delivered throughout the province by trained volunteers. Many of these workshops were designed by Sheila and updated with her assistance. Workshops include topics of interest to seniors in health, safety, legal, financial, advocacy and technology.

EDUCATION CONNECTION

Sheila has also worked with those who plan to interact with seniors in their working career. One intergenerational project created an organization and conference for gerontology students. She has assisted PHD students with their thesis work and she has met with UBC Medical Faculty to discuss their program through a seniors' lens. Sheila's work with university students resulted in the students writing many of the workshops for the Institute.

COSCO CONFERENCES: INFORMATIVE AND INSPIRING

Five major COSCO conferences have taken place in the first two decades of this century and Sheila was a main force in the conceptualization, planning and running of them.

2003 – The Romanow Report: Building on Values

In November 2002 Mr. Romanow released a report following a Royal Commission he had chaired, The Future of Health Care in Canada. He attended the COSCO conference and highlighted the major thrust of his report which was that provinces and territories should work together on solving Canada's health care problems which were primarily because of shortages, both financial and in terms of enough trained personnel.

2005 – Working to Prevent Elder Abuse

June 15 is Elder Abuse Awareness Day and COSCO called together many individuals who described the various forms of abuse, their frequency and the measures that need to be in place to deal with this societal problem. COSCO asked municipal governments to join in a declaration which pledged their support for such measures. More than 100 declarations were received. As a member of the Council to Reduce Elder Abuse COSCO works with many agencies to achieve zero tolerance of abuse.

2008 – Seniors' Health, Housing and Income in a Global Age-Friendly Community

In 2008 a lot of attention was being paid to defining what an age-friendly community looks like. Environmental factors were considered and the needs of people as they age were identified. This conference was solution oriented. To say that there should be hazard-free sidewalks is true but if it doesn't lead to action then it is futile. The provincial government gave grants for municipalities to adopt age-friendly goals.

2012 – The Joys and Tears of Living Longer

This conference explored the challenges and opportunities of Canadians' increased longevity. Speakers from around the world described how other jurisdictions deal with demographic changes and their impact on seniors' health, housing and income. Workshops gave participants the opportunity to contribute their point of view regarding needs and solutions. Clearly this conference was a natural follow-up to the 2008 conference.

2016 – Aging Well: A Quest for All Generations

This conference encouraged participants to think about the varying needs of people as they age. Speakers focused on physical changes. Others dealt with three large areas which have a huge impact on well-being: health, housing and income. Since its inception in 1950 COSCO has been active in fulfilling its mandate to work towards an optimum aging experience. The report that emerged from this conference mirrored our aspirations and our intentions.

2021 - Living in the 21st Century: A Seniors' Strategy

This was a virtual conference that continued the tradition of informing and inspiring begun many years ago. Some of the concerns haven't changed a great deal but others are part of a new world which we wanted to identify and explore, always through the lens of aging with respect and dignity in a society that values growing old as an opportunity and not a burden. Once again, a report was produced on this conference and can be found on COSCO's website.

COSCO'S SPECIALIZED WORKSHOPS

Sheila was involved with the design and delivery of specialized workshops, ones that are of pressing need to seniors and their organizations. One example is 'Stay on the Road', for seniors over 80 who have to go through the process of drivers' licence renewal. Sheila worked collaboratively with Road Safety BC to design and implement this workshop, then took it to seniors throughout the province. The other workshop is 'Passing the Torch', on succession planning and leadership skills for organizations, since most seniors organizations experience a great deal of turnover. Sheila played a key role in developing and presenting this timely workshop that also has travelled all over the province. There is now version 2 that has been presented virtually.

HEALTH CARE

In terms of seniors' health, Sheila has worked with consulting experts at VGH to develop a mini-workshop on what to expect if a senior must go to a hospital emergency room. As well, she has been involved, often as the lone seniors' voice, with the ICBC advisory Committee, the Council to Reduce Elder Abuse, Medication Safety (VGH), Care Experience Committee (Providence Health), Cardiac Referral Form Committee, Accessibility and Poverty Reduction Provincial Committees. Sheila was a leading voice in COSCO's work on Long Term Care standards. Sheila also was asked by a group of Victoria Nuns to give a workshop on advocating for their fellow Sisters who found themselves in Long Term Care.

Sheila became president of COSCO in 2020 and did a remarkable job rebuilding the organization, all the while sending letters to government and meeting with government Ministers.

Sheila was a tireless worker for the rights of elders. Even as her own health deteriorated, she continued to meet and participate in workshops. She said, "I'll just work until I die." And she did just that.

Her passing leaves a huge hole in COSCO. We will miss her quiet but iron leadership. We will miss her experience and knowledge. We will miss her ability to synthesize a discussion in a way that helps move us forward. She did all this with graciousness and respect for everyone involved. It is with great sadness and love that we say goodbye to our good friend and inspirational leader.

By Annette O'Connor and Linda Forsythe