# The importance and challenges of leading a ministry as a woman, with Michelle Porter of Souls Harbor Rescue Mission

Andrew Olsen: Hey, good afternoon, this is Andrew Olsen, the host of Rainmaker Fundraising Podcast and we're coming to you today from the Citygate Network Conference in beautiful Palm Springs, California, and I have two special guests today. Co-hosting with me today is my good friend Shawn Saunders from Dickerson, Bakker and Associates. Shawn, good afternoon.

Shawn Saunders: Yeah, good afternoon Andrew. Thanks for having me today.

Andrew Olsen: Excited to have you on here to co-host and really excited to have our friend Michelle Porter, who is the Founder and CEO of Souls Harbour Rescue Mission in Halifax, Nova Scotia. Michelle, good afternoon.

Michelle Porter: Hello. With a four hour time difference mind you.

Andrew Olsen: Good evening for you.

Michelle Porter: Yeah.

Andrew Olsen: Thank you so much for joining us. We're excited to talk to you today.

Michelle Porter: Great. It's good to be here.

Andrew Olsen: Before we get into some of the other questions that we've got I'd love it if you'd just take a couple of minutes. Tell us a little bit about who you are and tell us a little about the ministry.

Michelle Porter: Well, my husband and I started Souls Harbour Rescue Mission in Regina, Saskatchewan and after about 10 years, Citygate challenged us to start a mission in the Canadian Maritimes so off we went to Halifax and we started a little mission basically from nothing. We didn't know a soul there. We sold everything we had and we supported ourselves for a couple of years while we worked to build up a mission that's now serving 55,000 meals annually and we have four locations.

Andrew Olsen: Wow.

Michelle Porter: Yeah. That's the Twitter version.

Andrew Olsen: Pardon me, I drank some water and it didn't work well. I didn't realize you had four locations. That's really great. Tell me this, I tend to think that of the rescue mission directors you're pretty forward thinking. You're always looking for what's the next new thing to try whether it's program development or on the fundraising side and you're pretty engaged in the rescue mission community. But you're also only one of a handful of females CEOs and I got to imagine that that comes with some challenges. I'd love to hear your point of view on what some of those biggest challenges are but also what's been most rewarding for you.

Michelle Porter: Most rewarding is just to see lives changed obviously because when we left Regina they sold buildings, they canceled programs, all of that is temporal. But you know that the lives that you change while you were there. A hundred plus men and women and their kids, reunited, off the streets, they've got jobs and that really sticks with you.

Shawn Saunders: What's been most challenging?

Michelle Porter: Most challenging, well probably finding people to get onboard because you are starting from scratch. And so the second time was a little bit easier because we had a proven track record but, "Who are you, Ken and Michelle Porter coming up and thinking you can start something in our city?" And so it's a little bit challenging to get people to trust you. And on the client side, our guests in Halifax were really leery. They just ... It took many years for them to start opening up but now they're coming to all of our classes and taking our day programs. It's interesting culture wise to see that happening across the country.

Shawn Saunders: Yeah, sounds like it.

Andrew Olsen: If we're being honest, I think sometimes in conservative Christian ministry circles, and maybe particularly at least in my experience with rescue missions over the last 20 years, it can be hard to lead an organization as a female.

Michelle Porter: Right.

Andrew Olsen: Talk to us a little bit if you can about what your experience has been in that regard.

Michelle Porter: Well, I got to say mission number one, we went the full conservative route. Ken's going to have the title of CEO. I will be the assistant and then when Ken stepped down to do what he really loves, which is spiritual and chaplaincy work the board decided I couldn't be a CEO but I could be an Executive Director, which was odd. And there was just a different vibe after he stopped coming to board meetings and so I didn't recognize it at the time but I did have a female board member who was a very successful business woman who came to me privately and said, "This is what you're facing. You've got a glass ceiling situation."

Michelle Porter: When the opportunity came to move to Halifax we said, "You know what, we're going to work in our strengths and our gifts and even if it means they're more conservative, it's going to take longer for them to accept Michelle Porter as CEO," but we did it and it's eight years later and the community seems to really have rallied around us.

Andrew Olsen: That's great.

Shawn Saunders: That's awesome.

Andrew Olsen: How do you feel like the network of rescue missions? Is there a greater acceptance of female leadership at this point? Do you feel like you still, like there's still a glass ceiling in that respect across the network? Tell me about that.

Michelle Porter: Do you want the honest truth Andrew?

Andrew Olsen: As honest as you're willing to be.

Michelle Porter: I think Canadian missions accept it more than some American missions. But I do believe some of that is cultural and so I've been here ... This is my 20th conference if you can believe it.

Andrew Olsen: Really, wow.

Michelle Porter: Yeah.

Shawn Saunders: Wow.

Michelle Porter: And so people have known me for a long time. And even here there's a trust built up and it's like, I think they're okay with it but I would love to see more women coming into Citygate and saying, "Yeah, I can lead this program," or, "I can lead this mission." And if you are a woman in leadership, make sure you're getting paid what a man would be getting paid. I don't mean to stand on a soapbox but the reality is when I left one of my positions, the next person in line got a $7,000 pay raise. I'm like, "Okay, man. That's interesting." I'm a little more wise to these things now. Before I was a little bit naïve and didn't know that.

Andrew Olsen: Yeah.

Shawn Saunders: Yeah, well Michelle, switching gears. Well, not really switching gears but now that I'm asking a question, I actually started an organization myself, a recovery organization from scratch, with nothing. And when I say nothing, nothing. No technology, no money and you can pour in your own resources, which for me was sweat equity at the time and I was a professional fundraiser. You did something fairly unique and just as taxing if not more so. You've actually founded the mission that you're currently leading correct?

Andrew Olsen: Yeah. That's right.

Shawn Saunders: And you know, my experience, and I want to hear from you even if it's different from my experience. It's good to have a well rounded view of things. My experience was raising money for a startup for me was challenging. Much more so than an established organization. And it was difficult. Because it's the chicken and egg game. It's like, hey, you go to some investors, you've got some things laid out, you've got a prospectus, you've got a performer, you've done your due diligence and you say, "Hey, can you make an investment to this to help me launch it?"

Shawn Saunders: And it's like, "Well, you go start the program and get it going and then come back and talk to me." I'm like, "Well, but in order for me to start the program I got to have the capital to do that." You're in that space. Did you have a similar experience or were you guys able to navigate around that in some type of way?

Michelle Porter: Oh, I definitely relate to your story and you know we think of angel investors in the corporate world but nonprofits need them too.

Shawn Saunders: Right.

Michelle Porter: And so it's like you need someone who will take a risk on your idea and say, "Yeah, that is worth investing in." And we had some people come alongside. Someone who bought our building and held the mortgage for us. Right now we have just built a 17,000 square foot thrift store eight years later. Someone built it for us. Is allowing us 10 years to pay it back without any interest.

Shawn Saunders: Nice.

Michelle Porter: Things like that, they just keep happening, which is how you know that you're on the right track, that you have God's blessing and that the community's coming behind you.

Shawn Saunders: Yeah, so I hear you correctly with the store, they gave like a microloan. Was it from an individual?

Michelle Porter: Yeah, that's exactly right.

Shawn Saunders: Yeah. And that's cool. That was something we were talking about yesterday that there's this whole space out there of people who think that way about microloans and maybe they don't even make you pay back the money sometimes. They give it to you and you're paying it back and then they forgive some of it. Stuff like that. But it sounds like you had a similar experience.

Shawn Saunders: And I like what you said about the asking the donor, someone actually purchased the building if I heard you correctly? It seems like, what do you think about this, do you think because they're actually buying something tangible that that removes some of maybe the uncertainty of the risk factor or no?

Michelle Porter: Perhaps. But I mean he actually built it for us specifically

Shawn Saunders: Oh wow.

Michelle Porter: A building like that I suppose you could turn around if it didn't work and sell it but it's such a specific space to us that I do believe it was a risk on his part for sure but he just believed in our cause and what we were doing and our track record.

Shawn Saunders: Right. Awesome. All right, so here's another question. What kind of cultural challenges have you faced in launching and scaling this organization? And cultural challenges, I think we're talking internal organizational cultural challenges.

Michelle Porter: Now that we have had a bit of an explosion in the past year or so, we've doubled our staff, it just seemed like it started slow and now there's 20 of us. There's like I said, four facilities. Bringing in new staff who were from the corporate world has been a little bit challenging because they don't get what it's like to work at a rescue mission where you're all part of an extended family. And so it's been good once they realized that but at first it's foreign and there's definitely some headbutting going on.

Shawn Saunders: Right.

Michelle Porter: Yeah.

Shawn Saunders: Gotcha. Have you ... I don't know if you can give me an example or not but how have you dealt with that for our listeners? Because you know, I remember one of the greatest challenges at leading an organization for me, it wasn't once I got passed getting something going and had something tangible and had a farm in place, a recovery farm and lots of guys on it giving stories and so forth. We knew how to raise money. But when I got a team together, when I had enough money to hire program directors and stuff it's like, "Oh my gosh." You've got these conflicting personalities and trying to manage that. What guidance do you have in that area?

Michelle Porter: One of the ways that we handled that once we had all the staff, it was all September. Everybody's coming on board in September. We closed down all our facilities and had a day long retreat and we took people through ... Well, do you know Patrick Lencioni, Hungry, Humble, Smart? We took them through that and we said, "I don't care what you know as far as your intellect but you need to be emotionally smart. You need to be passionate, hungry. And you need to be humble and if you're all those three things you're going to fit into our culture." It was very very helpful. As well as just getting to know each other.

Andrew Olsen: For sure. Yeah.

Shawn Saunders: That's cool. In the midst of ... I find many times that stuff like that where Stephen Covey calls is sharpening the saw. Taking the time to do that in a setting like where you're ... I mean lets face it, because I've done the rescue work before, it is nasty hard work. I mean it's worthwhile because you're working with people made in the image of God but it's relationships are messy. And you're trying to rebuild someone from the ground up essentially right?

Michelle Porter: And you're exhausted because you're a founder and you're just, everything is new. Every single thing.

Shawn Saunders: And when you're a leader, I don't know if you faced this in your role but in the Christian circles I've found if it goes well, it's God. Praise God, he did it. You were just a tool. If it doesn't go well, it's you. It's your fault. Do you encounter some of that or no?

Michelle Porter: Well, I'm sure I would but yeah. That's a good point. It's a lot of pressure.

Shawn Saunders: Lot of pressure. I don't know if you get the appreciation that maybe sometimes it would be good for you to get but it sounds like you were able to, even with all that going on, step out and say, "Hey, this is important." This culture building activity, right?

Michelle Porter: Yeah.

Shawn Saunders: And it sounds like, I think you're going to say yes but it in what ways, couple ways have that paid off for you since you did that?

Michelle Porter: Well, just hearing staff refer to it. "Remember when we were all together you said this?" I'm like, "No, I don't, but that's excellent."

Andrew Olsen: But I'm glad you remember it.

Michelle Porter: Yeah, which it tells me that it made a lasting impact and we probably should consider doing that once a year.

Shawn Saunders: Yeah. Gotcha. All right. Well, the last question I have from my end at this juncture is what general tips and guidance do you have? Particularly you've got someone who's wanting to start something, and you know you look at the millennial generation and I'm on the very upper end of that, there's quite an interest in entrepreneurship.

Andrew Olsen: I can't believe he just admitted that by the way.

Shawn Saunders: I'm on the very upper end of it. Right on the cutoff. But anyway, I think it's a good thing because I'm aging every second. What advice would you have for someone that's wanting to do something like this? Just some general guidance as they're getting started?

Michelle Porter: I would say number one, don't do it by yourself. I was fortunate to have my husband doing it with me. We had our own savings. We were able to support ourselves. But if you are on your own, with no funding or no funder or self-funding, you have to find a team or it will not work. And you probably know that.

Shawn Saunders: Yeah, I had a team. I had three partners. I'd say I started ... We had a little bit of a foundation and we had nothing but a little bit of a foundation and I started the recovery program. But my brother did it with me and I had two other business partners and yeah, we pulled together and that made a huge difference.

Michelle Porter: Right. And so Citygate, a former association of Gospel Rescue Missions, they're not opening their doors. Two more I want to say para mission organizations that are doing similar work to what we're doing but wouldn't necessarily be classed as a rescue mission so there's some. You know what I mean? There's just different partners. Find a mentor. Whatever it is. I would say join as many associations as you can and that you can afford because it lends instant credibility. You've that little seal of approval. We were joining the Chamber of Commerce, Imagine Canada, you know.

Michelle Porter: Other tips would be to take care of yourself because you think you have enough energy because you're so excited and passionate but it's exhausting work and they talked a little bit about that at the conference too. Invest in yourself and take that daily, weekly, monthly opportunity. For me I like to set aside a weekend every quarter and I just go and I do my own thing at a hotel. I do some spiritual work as well as just some visioning and yeah.

Andrew Olsen: Good for you, yeah. I think that's one of the biggest mistakes that I see is organizational leaders, and mean this myself, thinking that, "If I'm going to be a good leader I have to always be on," and not realizing that if you don't take care good care of yourself you can't take good care of anybody else. Right?

Michelle Porter: Well, and even like, you wrote a book. Now you're always on no matter where you are because somebody's read your book. And so it's this fishbowl living that you have and you've got to set time.

Andrew Olsen: That's a really great way to describe it that. Right. Well awesome. Thank you so much for being here with us today.

Shawn Saunders: Thank you.

Andrew Olsen: If anybody who's listening to this wants to reach out to learn more or to connect with you about your experience, building an organization from the ground up, what's the best way for them to reach you?

Michelle Porter: You know what, well, first of all check out our social media and get your own social media page and make sure they all match. Our website is shrm, as in Souls Harbour Rescue Mission, .ca, Facebook page is shrm.ca, Twitter, whatever. That's probably an easy way. You can also just email me, mporter.rescue. It's Michelle Porter .rescue, @gmail.com.

Andrew Olsen: Awesome.

Michelle Porter: Yeah.

Shawn Saunders: Good stuff.

Andrew Olsen: Thank you again for being here today.

Shawn Saunders: Thank you Michelle.

Michelle Porter: All right, it was great. Thank you.