

Thoughtful Changes – Mental Health – Micro Loan Success

When Amiee Wilson was only 14 years old, her mother's cancer diagnosis turned her world upside down. For the next five years, she endured the disease and its effects alongside her best friend – her Mom - until she passed away in 1999.

Amiee lost her mother when she was only 19 years old and the devastation carved a path out for her future career, she just didn't know it yet. After a decade of grieving and a corporate career that wasn't satisfying or passion-driven, Amiee leaned into self-care. Soul-searching, yoga, Buddhism and nutrition were all a big part of her healing and she believed it could help others as well.

In 2012 Amiee went back to school to pursue the Natural Nutrition program and became a Registered Holistic Nutrition Consultant (RHNC). She knew the value of wellness and how a focus on nutrition, thoughtfulness and self-care could lead to better balance and happier lives. She went on to complete a Masters of Arts in Counselling in Psychology in 2017 and completed a practicum as part of her program.

Her practicum was where she saw the importance of accessible and affordable care. "My practicum experience was transformational," Wilson says. "I was mentored by a great leader who was compassionate, brilliant and wanted to make a difference." Realizing that many clients had no reliable access to mental health care was a lightbulb moment for Amiee and that is when she started to explore ways in which she could give back.

Although helping others was her priority, she needed to get on her feet first. After graduation, she started her own practice, 'Amiee Wilson Counselling' in September of 2019, just six months before the COVID-19 global pandemic changed everything. Once her practice was up and running, she immediately saw patients who faced similar barriers to those she treated during her practicum. They were in desperate need of affordable and accessible care. She thought about her mother and reflected on her own grief, which took nearly a decade to really understand, and she decided it was her time to give back. "Everybody deserves care, no matter what their life situation is. I knew that my mom would be proud knowing I was able to give back to others in need."

In 2019, after attending the Mashup Lab and researching next steps, Amiee set up a not-for-profit 'Thoughtful Changes – Mental Health'. With the goal of making mental health and counselling services accessible, her first barrier to making this a reality was finances.

That's when Amiee learned about the Micro-Loan program, offered by the Sydney Credit Union and the Cape Breton Partnership. She learned that loans were available for female entrepreneurs in Cape Breton – Unama'ki and knew that this is exactly what she needed.

Under the Micro-Loan Pilot Program, female entrepreneurs from across Cape Breton – Unama'ki were eligible to apply for a loan of up to \$10,000. The pilot began in January, 2020 and ran for three months.

The financial aspects of the loan were managed by the Sydney Credit Union and the Cape Breton Partnership provided access to mentors, programs and additional resources the entrepreneurs may require such as business planning, support for export, immigration and economic research.

Amiee applied to the program and was successful. Her original intention was to set up a physical space for counsellors to work together in a collaborative model. After COVID-19 impacted the plans for an office space, the plan evolved to offering accessible care - virtually.

“We knew that counseling services in person were not the right fit at that time, so we came up with a model to offer this to those in need – through virtual counseling.” With a growing number of counsellors joining the team, ‘Thoughtful Changes – Mental Health’ is up and running and serving clients with financial barriers to accessing mental health resources.

“I know that without access to this loan, we would not be able to offer these services,” says Wilson. “Today, we can help those in need and I can offer others what I needed when I was younger.”

Thanks to both the Cape Breton Partnership and the Sydney Credit Union, this service is available and accessible and will grow with the needs.