


 A portrait of Mary Aitken, a woman with short, wavy blonde hair, smiling. She is wearing a dark blue V-neck top and long, thin earrings with small white beads. The background is a blurred indoor setting with a decorative metal screen on the right.
 

## MARY AITKEN

After beginning her career in the financial industry in the UK, Mary Aitken moved to Canada — and became a serial entrepreneur. Over two decades she launched several successful start-ups and investment companies. In 2004, she opened the doors on her sixth start-up and current venture: a private women's club named Verity. Her goal? To attract a dynamic group of women to an enriching oasis in the downtown Toronto core. It would be dedicated not only to its membership — by allowing them to forge meaningful business networks and enhance personal well-being — but to the belief that it could affect and improve the lives of women generally in the community. Mary herself is actively involved in the Toronto community, with interests that range from business, to the arts, to education.

**My first job ever was...**A junior financial analyst (one step up from the tea lady) in an English stock brokerage in the City of London. The Company has since disappeared, but through no fault of mine... I don't think.

**I decided to be an entrepreneur because...**It seemed at the time that there was nothing I could not do. Now I think there are many things I cannot do.

**My boldest move to date was...**To enter the women's market. It's still very much terra incognita with many opportunities and many pitfalls.

**I surprise people when I tell them...**That a social enterprise can coexist well with commercial enterprises. Surrounding Verity, a social enterprise, are three commercial businesses: The Ivy at Verity hotel, Sweetgrass Spa, and GEORGE restaurant.

**My proudest accomplishment is...**To have secured the support of over 800 of

the most interesting women in Canada as Members of Verity. They come from all walks of life: business, professional, politicians, civil servants, the arts, NGO's and foundations. It's a diverse collection of the best of Canada (with many bearing the Order of Canada). What a tumultuous group they are when they get together for our Members' Dinners twice a year.

**I would tell my 20-year-old self...**To be bold, listen carefully and change the world. Also, study math and engineering.

**My best advice to people starting out in business is...**Be willing to ask the hard questions and have hard conversations.

**Work/life balance is...**What we address at Verity. Members tell me that it is not a club but a life-changing community. It's a third place between work and home where burdens fall away and work-life balance begins to happen.

**My biggest setback was...**Misjudging the amount of working capital needed

in my start-ups. I overcame this problem by changing my business plans as I went along to reduce cash requirements. In business, unlike personal relationships, almost every problem is correctable — if you take the time and evaluate alternatives. Avoid feeling defeated when money problems inevitably arise.

**If you googled me, you still wouldn't know...**I used to be on the Executive Board Committee of a boys boarding school which was going co-ed — the end of the world for a lot of the alums. But the school is now better than it ever was.

**I stay inspired by...**The many fantastic success stories our Verity Members tell me that had their origins at Verity. It's amazing what women can accomplish when they get together in a dynamic environment.

**My next step is...**Expanding for all the ways women want to work at Verity including space for team gatherings, client meetings, and co-working spaces. ☛