Elaine Laberge, PhD

Imagining Otherwise

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Executive Profile: https://echoesofpoverty.com/about-elaine/

EXECUTIVE PROFILE

I question what has come to be accepted as inevitable and imagine what else might be possible. I bring business, research, and social innovation together to strengthen organizations and advance their purpose. My career spans executive leadership, entrepreneurship, financial and operational management, communications, research, and community-based initiatives. I build relationships, connect evidence with practice, and work with people to create conditions for meaningful and sustainable change.

AREAS OF EXPERTISE

Executive and organizational leadership • Strategic planning and governance • Financial stewardship and diversification • Organizational renewal and change • Business development and social innovation • Strategic communications and public relations • Research, knowledge mobilization, and translation • Community partnerships and stakeholder engagement • EDI, decolonization, and Indigenization • Community-based participatory research

EXECUTIVE LEADERSHIP

Executive Director | Canadian Mental Health Association of Northern BC | January 2024–Present

Lead a regional mental health organization with a budget exceeding $5 million, approximately 70 staff and volunteers, and more than 12 programs serving Northern BC.

Strategy & Organizational Development

- Lead organizational strategy, operations, financial sustainability, communications, partnerships, and service delivery across a large and geographically dispersed region.
- Authored "Northern Realities; Shared Recovery," the guiding northern star for CMHA's new five-year strategic plan, and worked with the facilitator to refine and finalize the plan.
- Strengthen organizational alignment and coordination through relationship-based leadership and attention to local and regional context.

Financial & Organizational Sustainability

- Secured more than $500,000 in additional funding during the first year of leadership and support longer-term funding and diversification planning.
- Established CMHA's first Finance Manager position and recruited a CPA, strengthening dedicated financial expertise, oversight, and decision-making.
- Lead financial diversification planning and advocate for stronger financial foundations and unrestricted reserves.

People, Partnerships & Community Impact

- Built a leadership team that better reflects the communities served and embedded equity, diversity, inclusion, and decolonization frameworks in hiring.
- Conceived and secured funding for CMHA's first Elder-in-Residence initiative, advancing decolonization and Indigenization within a 60-year-old organization.
- Strengthened the relationship with the Crisis Prevention, Intervention & Information Centre for Northern BC, shifting from competition toward complementary approaches to immediate crisis support and longer-term recovery; secured funding to train leaders from the Crisis Centre and the Schizophrenia Society of Prince George as ASIST facilitators.

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- Led continuity of food support for more than 500 households after the Nourish Food Bank in Quesnel was destroyed by fire in May 2025, securing emergency funding, new premises, and substantial community donations.

Research, Communications & Social Change

- Secured $75,000 and lead CMHA's first two research projects in its 60-year history, examining mental illness stigma among seniors and housing discrimination experienced by people living with mental illness.
- Lead research from proposal development through implementation, assembling teams and ensuring organizational research ethics.
- Integrate sociological research and a social determinants perspective into organizational leadership, connecting mental health with housing, food security, social exclusion, and structural inequality.
- Lead communications and media relations; write and distribute organizational press releases that consistently receive media pickup, and serve as CMHA's spokesperson.

BUSINESS LEADERSHIP

President and CEO | JAM Inc. | 1998–2014

Founded and led a business development, communications, and branding firm serving clients across Canada, the United States, and international markets.

Strategy & Organizational Development

- Built a sustainable business through clear market positioning, responsive service, repeat business, referrals, and trusted client relationships.
- Helped clients clarify business values, ideal customers, and value propositions, then focus communications and business development on sustainable growth.

Financial & Operational Management

- Led business development, pricing, financial management, staffing, contractors, and project delivery.
- Developed accounting systems, procedures, policies, budgets, and financial reports; grew the business without an advertising budget.

Client Relationships & Communications

- Developed brands, marketing strategies, public relations initiatives, and communications materials tailored to client audiences and objectives.
- Built relationships grounded in research, trust, and reciprocity, including connecting clients with appropriate partners when needs fell outside JAM's expertise.

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Accountant; Manager, Communications and Marketing | Merit Contractors Association | 1992–1998

Worked across financial management, organizational operations, communications, and marketing for an Alberta-based nonprofit serving the open-shop construction sector.

Financial Stewardship & Organizational Innovation

- Stewarded more than $20 million in membership-based funds and developed financial systems, policies, processes, and procedures.
- Analyzed benefit-plan administration costs; the analysis supported an in-house, arm's-length benefits company that generated savings and significantly expanded coverage for members, employees, and families.

Communications, Marketing & Member Engagement

- Established and led the Association's first in-house communications and marketing capacity, including branding, member communications, and organizational positioning.
- Developed the annual magazine and advertising model, making the publication profitable; organized profitable international construction conferences.
- Created an EFAP communications campaign using humour and industry-specific messaging to address mental health stigma in construction; the provider reported its highest program uptake in its history.

SOCIAL INNOVATION

Founder and Director | Shoestring Initiative | 2018–Present

Founded a research-informed social innovation initiative supporting first-generation university students from poverty-class backgrounds.

- Develop community-building, mentorship, belonging, intercultural connectedness, and advocacy approaches that advance educational equity.
- Translate research on poverty discrimination and social class into public scholarship, institutional dialogue, and community action.
- Build relationships with researchers, universities, community organizations, and other partners.

RESEARCH & KNOWLEDGE MOBILIZATION

Postdoctoral Fellow | Department of Sociology, Carleton University | 2023–2024 | Remote, Contract

Contributed to a five-year national housing research initiative examining affordable rental housing for people in greatest need, including young people transitioning from homelessness into supportive housing.

- Developed project-management systems and communication processes; coordinated activities, timelines, deliverables, budgets, and partner relationships across a national collaboration.
- Translated findings into reports, presentations, and recommendations to inform housing policy and practice.

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National Education Lead | LivEx Network, York University | 2022–2023 | Contract, Remote
Led national education and knowledge-mobilization initiatives supporting postsecondary students with lived and living experience of homelessness.

- Developed educational programming and knowledge-translation opportunities; facilitated exchange among researchers, educators, service providers, and community organizations across Canada.
- Mentored more than 70 students and developed accessible learning resources and equity-based bursary policies and procedures.

Doctoral Researcher | University of Victoria | 2017–2021
PhD in Education; Vanier Canada Graduate Scholarship. Dissertation: *Pushing Privileged Pillars in Canadian Universities*

- Led community-based participatory action research on poverty discrimination and classism in Canadian universities, working alongside seven women with lived experience of persistent poverty who had accessed undergraduate education.
- Developed a collaborative approach recognizing participants as knowledge holders and active contributors; integrated knowledge mobilization throughout the research.
- Used research conversations, focus groups, case studies, autoethnography, photography, poetry, and found poetry to explore and communicate participants' experiences.
- Dissertation received the Canadian Association for Action Research in Education's Outstanding Dissertation in Action Research Award (2022).

Master's Researcher | University of Alberta | 2015–2017
MA in Sociology; SSHRC Canada Graduate Scholarship. Thesis: *The Reverberations of Childhood Poverty: Composing Lives in Higher Education*

- Conducted a nine-month narrative inquiry with three undergraduate students, exploring how childhood poverty shaped their lives and experiences within and beyond university.
- Used narrative analysis, autoethnography, poetry, and found poetry to connect research insights with public engagement and grassroots action.

EDUCATION

- PhD, Education | University of Victoria | 2021
- MA, Sociology | University of Alberta | 2017
- BA, Sociology | University of Alberta | 2015
- BA, Theatre and English | Dalhousie University | 2012
- Diploma, Computer Information Systems and Design | Lethbridge Polytechnic
- Diploma, Accounting | MacEwan University

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SELECTED RECOGNITION & PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

- Vanier Canada Graduate Scholarship
- SSHRC Canada Graduate Scholarship
- Outstanding Dissertation in Action Research Award (2022)

- ASIST
- Psychological Health and Safety
- The Working Mind
- Research Ethics
- GBA+/SGBA+
- Equity, Diversity, Inclusion and Belonging
- Trauma-Informed Practice