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HOST: Sports is a universal language in the world. From Halifax to Hyderabad, Nunavut to Nairobi. And what also seems weirdly universal is the support of men's teams over women's. Instead of wallowing in this vast discrepancy, Brenda Address wants us to see it as a place to grow from. A rallying cry to mobilize in support of women in sports. Welcome to The Conversation Piece. This is Brenda Address - former commissioner of the Canadian Women's Hockey League.

BRENDA ADDRESS: I'm Brenda Address and I am the Founder and President of SheIS and the former commissioner of the Canadian Women's Hockey League. And I want to basically talk to you and challenge you today on what I believe is needed to advance women in sports.

About two and a half years ago, I was sitting in my office, still at the time the commissioner of the Canadian Women's Hockey League, and at that time a ton of people were marching because of the political happenings across the border and many things, even within our own country with laws and different policies that were being set, and people were gathering and marching. And a lot of my friends would call me up and they say, "Hey Brenda, you going to march?" and I went, "Nope, not going to march." And they said, "What are you talking about? You march all the time, you're a feminist." And I said, "Nope, not going to march." You know, at my age we've marched so many times and nobody takes action after marching. We do the march, we do what we say, we have great speeches and then we as individuals don't take action. So what I wanted to do was try to create something from a very positive place.

You take a look at sports, sports is the universal language of the world. It's the most products sold across the world. And yet for us as women, what we were hearing at the age of 13, we were dropping out of sports. Why? Because there was no career for us. Media only covered us 4%, no funds to create the professional league. It was all based around negativity. And I wanted to create something based on positivity. I wanted to gather the women and men together to make a difference. But the first thing I was going to do when I started SheIS, is actually tell the truth. I was going to say that it's not the media's fault, it's not the sponsor's fault, it's your fault. It is your fault because you, the fan, did not show up. You, the fan, did not buy the ticket, you, the fan, did not turn on Digital or Linear to watch us, to watch the other women in sports.

So SheIS was then created to say something very simple. From this moment on, we're not going to talk about the 4% in a negative way, we're going to talk about the 4% in the way that we as a fan can change it from 4% to 8%, so that we can put positive stories to our 13 year old woman who knows that she can grow up and be a professional sport athlete and be paid for being that athlete. We wanted to make the difference. My first phone call was to some friends of mine who were commissioners in the other leagues and we historically created for the first time ever, 13 commissioners. Every single women's professional sports commissioner, together on one collective working together, and not in silos for the very first time.

Now, I can only tell you that there's no way that 13 men's professional leagues can get together and work in the same room, nevermind anything else along those lines. So SheIS was created specifically to connect and mobilize fans into creating growth for women's professional leagues, and that was done by what we call the SheIS nation. We're sweeping the country with a positive message. And where did I come up with that? It came up actually from when, quite a few years



ago, I received a phone call from the YWCA and it was Heather who left a message on my machine and said something like, "Hey Brenda, call us, this is the Toronto YWCA and I want to talk to you." And the first thing I said was, "I didn't apply to the YWCA, why is she calling me?"

And she called again and she said, "Brenda, you won the Women of Distinction for your work with the Canadian Women's Hockey League." And I was like, "Wow, that is such a huge honor." And when you get that honor, you get to make a three minute speech, not even a seven minute one, they give you a three and say make it work. And, of course, my name being Andress, I go first, in that particular year. So, I walk up to the stage and in my mind I go, "I got three minutes and I want to make an impact, but more importantly I want to say something that's going to change my life."

Because again, I go back to the person who can make a difference or a change in anything, is me and you. And so, I walked up to the podium and man, I've got to tell you, this is one time I spoke that I was nervous, because I knew what I was about to say could be controversial, and yet I knew I had to say it because it's what I truly believed. So, I walked up to the stage and at that particular time I said, "Thank you so much for this wonderful award from the Women of Distinction and I just want to tell you that I deserve it and I'm worthy of it."

And for a brief moment, 1,000 women in the same room was quiet. And I was like, "Oh my gosh." And then I specifically said, "Why?" Because I think as women, we don't believe that we're worthy and deserving of a lot of things in our lives, in jobs, in relationships, and the opportunity to take change. And tonight I want to add one more to that list. I want to tell you that I belong. After that award, I grew in the fact of believing that I belonged, and then I came to say that with SheIS, that we belong. And the difficulty for us with women in sports is that we don't believe we belong. We don't believe we belong in the dressing room, we don't believe we belong in the board room, we don't believe we belong as owners. We don't believe that we belong.

And, in order to belong, you have to take action. You have to believe that. I can tell you this. When I was as the commissioner and even where I am right now, if a job goes up for posting, if a man has 30% of the skills, he'll apply. If a woman has 99, she won't. She won't apply. And then what happens is, is that if she gets the job, she gets in that boardroom and she still doesn't believe she belongs. And then you know what happens after that? We as women get in the boardroom and then we don't believe the other women belong. And it's like a vicious cycle.

So, SheIS, when we put it together, we took it and we said we're going to be positive, we're going to speak about the fact that we all belong. And my message to you is very simple. You are the person that can make the difference in advancing women, not just in sports, but in anything. But it takes action. You cannot get on your social media and go, "Me too, I believe in it." Yes, I sponsor it. Yes, I go and watch. It doesn't work. You have to take action to make change in this world. You have to know that you are worthy, you are deserving, and you belong, and then take action to make sure that happens. Thank you.

HOST: Brenda Andress spoke at The Walrus Talks Women of Distinction, and she's just one of the over 800 fantastic Canadians who have walked and wheeled the stage at The Walrus Talks.

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