

Looking Back on Nearly Three Years of the Henry's Foundation



Photo: Gaye Stein, Andy Stein, Amy Stein, Gillian Stein Photo Credit: Anthony Jackson

We launched the [Henry's Foundation](#) on March 12, 2020, with no idea of the turmoil the world was about to fall into. When we closed our stores just days later as part of efforts to “flatten the curve” of COVID-19 case counts, we assumed, as did most people, that we’d be shut down for a couple of weeks at most. Soon it became clear that the pandemic was not going to be a short-term event, but we were determined to stay the course for our foundation.

It's hard to believe we're coming up to the end of 2022, and that the Henry's Foundation has been up and running for nearly three years. What's even more amazing is to consider all the things we've accomplished, especially given that so much of that time was marked by lockdowns and other pandemic-related challenges.

How It Began

In my 19 years on the corporate side of the Henry's business, I worked in nearly every department in the company, so I have a well-rounded knowledge of everything that we do. My background is in business and marketing, and specifically events and sponsorships, so when we started thinking about launching a foundation, I jumped at the chance to assume a leadership role. I've always loved taking on new challenges; I like my work day to be different every day, and I like to figure out how to make things better. And when I put my mind to something, I give 110% to get it done.

We needed to build a charitable giving strategy. Thanks to the values instilled and example set by my parents, Gaye and [Andy Stein](#), philanthropy has always been a core part of Henry's and our family. We would gladly donate to any cause that was important to an employee or a partner. We'd been a title sponsor and actively volunteered for the Women's Golf Tournament in support of the Marvella Koffler Breast Centre at Mount Sinai Hospital in Toronto, helping to raise \$1.3 million over ten years. I was a member of the Leadership Sinai Board of Mount Sinai, again helping to fundraise and run events. We sponsored Leave Out Violence (LOVE), a youth organization promoting leadership and positive change through media arts. For two years, Henry's sponsored the Ride to Conquer Cancer in support of the Princess Margaret Cancer Centre in Toronto, and I myself did the more-than-200-kilometre ride seven times.

But we started to realize that we were spreading our giving efforts too broadly, and that if we really wanted to make an impact, we would do better to choose a focus area—a targeted strategy.

There was no question in anyone's mind: we should focus on mental health.

Mental Health Matters to My Family

As my sister, [Henry's CEO Gillian Stein](#), shared publicly for the first time last year, via a [LinkedIn article](#) and a [profile in the Financial Post](#), mental illness runs in our family. Gillian and our father both live with bipolar disorder. Our grandfather died by suicide and was likely bipolar, too. I myself live with depression, having been diagnosed during my second year of university.

We also had a close friend of our family and company die by suicide, and we were all struck by the fact that nobody talked openly about it. If someone dies of cancer or heart disease or a car accident, it's openly discussed and mourned. Often the only way we even suspect someone has died by suicide is by the conspicuous silence about their cause of death.

In our family, mental illness is acknowledged and discussed. We knew we could play an important role in eliminating the stigma around it and help people living in Canada get the support they need.

My parents believe in this mission with all of their hearts, and I can tell you the Henry's Foundation would not exist without them. They provided the seed money to get it off the ground, for one thing, but more than that, they created an openness to talk about mental health. This is a deeply held value in our family. This foundation was not created for business reasons; it is deeply personal and important to the Stein family. I can't say that enough.

Starting Off on the Right Foot

I spent six months prior to our launch doing research on foundations. I had more coffees with more people than I'd ever had in my life. I told people our story, asked if there was anything I was missing or that didn't make sense. We wanted to be sure this was the right thing. What I found was resounding support and enthusiasm, and a ton of great advice.

Of course there was a lot I had to learn personally, and there always will be—that's something I love about it. I've learned an incredible amount about how to operate a registered charity and private foundation. Committed to building on the trust people have in the Henry's brand, I sought out knowledgeable advice and exemplary legal counsel, to make sure we follow every rule to the letter. I've joined several groups for mental health leaders and advocates, and the people I've met and the information I've learned has been invaluable.

Incredible Progress Since Then

We sensed that “mental health” itself was still too broad, so we worked with a social impact firm to help us narrow our scope by defining our “case for support” (i.e., a plan that lays out our purpose, vision and, and forms the basis for everything we do). We wanted to get really focused on outcomes—on making a meaningful impact and actually change lives for the better.

Ultimately it became clear that we would focus on supporting mental health through the creative arts, which are of course near and dear to our hearts at Henry's. But it wasn't just that creative arts are related to our business. Research shows that art-based interventions, such as photography, videography, podcasting, painting, and other types of artistic expression, can be effective as therapeutic and mental wellness strategies. They can also help people to find safe, supportive communities and learn more about themselves.

We may have had to close our stores during the pandemic, but the foundation has been open the whole time. We simply shifted all of our efforts online, focusing on our website and social media. Notable achievements during that time include:

- Working with an industry expert to help us **identify the right partners**, based on how they provide support, who they serve, and the extent of their reach. We never want our foundation to be competing with another one—the more we can work together with other organizations, the bigger collective impact we will have. This resulted in partnerships with Kids Help Phone, Jack.org, the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) Foundation, the VGH+UBC Hospital Foundation, the Douglas Foundation, and Mental Health Foundation of Nova Scotia.
- **Sharing Gillian's story** publicly, as the first step in sharing our family's story openly and transparently to help break the stigma.
- Launching our **#UncapturedMoments** campaign, encouraging people to share photos of their lives when they're *not* perfect, *not* at their best. The message of the campaign is that “it's ok to not be ok.”
- Launching **Mental Health Minute**, through which we work with our partners to create short videos for social media, featuring experts in mental health providing important information and people sharing their personal mental health challenges and stories.
- Running our first **50/50 charitable raffle** in the fall of 2021, with early-bird prizes donated by vendors, which built lots of awareness for what we're trying to do.

- Running our first **fundraising drive and matching program** in March 2022, through which the Stein family matched \$10,000.
- For **World Mental Health Day** in October 2022, commissioning an incredible spoken-word “reverse poem” by Canadian poet, youth activist, philanthropist and wellness influencer **Wali Shah** (who also performed for former President Obama’s visit to Canada in 2020), to demonstrate how content creation and creativity can be used to talk about mental health. [Check it out on our Instagram feed.](#)

As we’ve been able to re-open our stores, we’ve also been able to launch some in-person events. Importantly, the foundation played a significant role in the grand opening of Henry’s new flagship store on Church Street in Toronto this past September. That event was an opportunity to officially re-launch the foundation, showcasing our strategy and finely-tuned focus, our evidence-based approach, and our clear, concise vision for the future of mental health in Canada.

That event marked the first time we met physically with our partners since our soft launch in March of 2020; I can’t tell you how good it felt. A big part of that new space is the @185 Content Creator Studio, a place where we will welcome creators, students, organizations and more. It was wonderful to introduce our partners to the space, which will also be available to host foundation events, run workshops and courses, and help people tell their stories.

A Bright Future

Now we’re planning for the future. Our case for support includes a vision and an implementation plan for the next three-to-five years. At a high level, our plan includes assembling a leadership council, supporting and building programs with our partners, fundraising, and a communications strategy.

While there’s lots of work to be done, I feel immensely proud and optimistic about the good that the Henry’s Foundation is doing to eliminate stigma and help people find pathways to mental health through arts and creativity.

As for me, I couldn’t be happier about my decision to launch into this new career at age 45. It allows me to give back in a meaningful way, and to model that behaviour for my daughters, who are 11 and 14. They’re proud of their mom—one of my daughters even did a project on the Henry’s Foundation—and it’s allowed us to have even more open conversations about mental health than ever before.

Seeing our family’s long-held values of openness and respect reflected in my daughters’ eyes? That’s perhaps the greatest reward of all.