

260 Sets of Eyes, One Popped Cork, and a Whole Lot of Heart

by Iris Thompson-Burton



Two hundred and sixty of us. That's how many gathered at the Kingsmills for our Highland Business Women Awards – a sell-out celebration of women in business, leadership, and community. The room was electric. Not just with applause, but with connection. With pride. With the kind of joy that only comes when we lift each other up and mean it.

I was partway through my speech, mid-flow, when my smart watch buzzed. A call was coming in – from a guest staying at the Old Manse!. And just as I tried to discreetly ignore it (note to self: disconnect all devices when 260 sets of eyes are on you),

a cork popped. Loud. Unapologetic. Joyful. Perfectly timed. (Thank you!) It snapped me out of distraction and brought me right back into the room. Back to the moment. And honestly, I'm grateful. Because that cork reminded me what we were really celebrating: presence, spontaneity, and the kind of community where even interruptions feel like part of the story.

To every winner and finalist – my heartfelt congratulations. Your achievements are extraordinary, but it's your generosity, your resilience, and your spirit that truly shine. You make HBW what it is: a place where success is shared and celebrated.

A special thank you to the unsung hero of the night, Darrel Paterson of HNM. Darrel, you were the swan gliding across the surface while pedalling like mad underneath – and none of us saw the hiccups because you handled them with such grace. Your efforts ensured the night ran smoothly, and we're so grateful.

It was also a joy to welcome some of HBW's founding members to the celebration. Their presence reminded us of our roots – not just as a network, but as a movement built on connection, courage, and care. We stand on their shoulders, and we carry their spirit forward.

And while we're talking about what's seen and unseen, I want to revisit something I shared recently on my LinkedIn about cliques and empowerment. It struck a chord. So many women messaged me to say, "I've felt that too." That moment of being on the edge of a circle. That quiet wondering: Do I belong here?

Let me say this again, loud and clear: **you do.**

Empowerment isn't just about awards or titles. It's about making space. It's about noticing who's not yet at the table and pulling up a chair. It's about naming the dynamics that make us feel small – and choosing to do better.

HBW is evolving. We're not perfect, but we're committed. To care. To clarity. To connection that goes deeper than networking. And to the kind of leadership that welcomes, rather than impresses.

And speaking of celebration – don't forget the ASB Awards are just around the corner, taking place on 4th November in Perth. As HBW members, you're automatically affiliate members of ASB, which means you're part of a wider network of brilliant women across Scotland. Let's show up, cheer loudly, and keep building bridges.

So here's to the popped corks, the buzzing watches, the unsung heroes, the founders, and the women who keep showing up – whether they're centre stage or quietly cheering from the sidelines.



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