



## Wiebke Wilkens An Award-Winning Career in Health and Safety

By **Courtney Tait** Photos **Stephen Wild**

For more than two decades, Wiebke Wilkens has been helping make Kingston a safer place to live and work.

As president of the not-for-profit organization Kingston: Partners for a Safe Community, which Wiebke co-founded in 1997, she has been a leading force in getting Kingston designated as a safe community by Parachute, a national injury prevention organization.

As the founder and principal consultant of Wilkens Health & Safety Solutions (WHSS), she and her team provide businesses the guidance needed to foster a workplace that's safe and compliant with provincial and federal requirements. "We provide custom program development and hands-on training, working with our clients to come up with solutions to address their concerns," says Wiebke.

Born in Germany, Wiebke relocated to Quebec with her parents and siblings in 1965 when she was four. Three years later, Wiebke's older sister, who was 12 at the time, was injured in a motor vehicle accident. She was in a coma for the remainder of her life, cared for at home by Wiebke's parents. "Looking back, I have often wondered if my sister's accident led to my interest in the health and safety field," says Wiebke, who credits her ambition and work ethic to her parents, who provided encouragement and support throughout her life.

Wiebke moved to Kingston to attend Queen's University where she completed her undergraduate degree in life sciences. She planned to become a physician, but when she wasn't accepted into medical school she took a position in occupational health and safety on campus as a hazardous waste technician. This experience led to a position as inspector

with the Ministry of Labour in Toronto, where she later moved into various management positions, eventually returning to Kingston as district manager. "The senior management team at the Ministry of Labour recognized my potential and supported me by giving me various opportunities to develop my leadership skills," she says.

Along with her undergraduate degree, Wiebke holds a postgraduate certificate in human resource management and completed postgraduate training in industrial hygiene at the University of Toronto. In 1996, she became the director of Environmental Health and Safety at Queen's University, where she stayed for five years prior to founding WHSS.

Wiebke says some of the most important skills she has carried with her throughout her career are the ability to articulate clearly to members of all levels within an



organization, identify critical needs quickly and work within a team. "I'm not afraid to say 'let me get back to you' and pull in the resources I need," she says. "I'm also not afraid to point out shortcomings or needs to an organization to achieve the required results. I have been described as being very 'results oriented.'"

In 2001, Wiebke turned what she calls the "magic 40" and decided it was time to start her own consulting firm. WHSS was founded with a focus on small and medium sized businesses that don't have access to the same resources large companies use to ensure they are complying with safety legislation.

Wilkens serves a diverse clientele including educational institutions, construction firms, restaurants, retail businesses and the professional health community. The firm's team is made up of experts in the Occupational Health and Safety and Employment Standards fields. WHSS is also the corporate sponsor of a Kingston-based Multi Sector Safety Group, a WSIB initiative to help eliminate workplace injuries and illnesses in Ontario.

In 1999, Wiebke was awarded the first place national Canadian Association of University Business Officers (CAUBO) award for innovation for her work with Kingston: Partners for a Safe Community. In 2000, she received the Award of Merit from the Industrial Accident Prevention Association (IAPA) for her volunteer work within the Heritage Division. And in 2006, she was inducted into the Most Venerable Order of the Hospital of St. John of Jerusalem in recognition of her work with St. John Ambulance, Loyalist Branch, Ontario Council and the Kingston community.

Also an award-winning gardener, Wiebke has created an "English Country Garden" on her 2.2- acre property. "Gardening is relaxing," she says. "I enjoy being creative working with different plants and colours." Wiebke's garden won awards in 2012 and 2014 for the Best Large Garden in the Kingston area.

Along with her work and gardening, Wiebke enjoys spending time with family and exploring different parts of the world with her partner of 20 years, Ronald.

"He has been by my side throughout my career, mentoring and encouraging me to take on the challenges associated with founding and running my own business," she says. "Without Ronald's support and encouragement, much of what I have achieved may not have happened." Wilkens says she feels honoured to be part of a family that includes Ronald's children and grandchildren, as well as her mother, remaining siblings, nieces, grand nieces and nephews.

As part of her role at Wilkens Health and Safety Solutions, Wilkens mentors placement students in the health and safety field, a process she says is very rewarding. "I enjoy taking on placement students and mentoring individuals starting out in the occupational health and safety or human resources fields," she says. "Mentorship is such an important part of developing the necessary skills to advance in today's workplaces. Without the support of my various mentors, I would not be where I am today. I would like to make the same impact on other people's lives, inspiring others to pursue this work." ■