

# Cottage Dreams: Celebrating cancer survival

How Seana O'Neill created an innovative program for cancer survivors—and, in doing so, found her passion

By Catherine Dunphy



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tournaments. **The program offers a week at private, donated cottages for recent cancer survivors and their families**—about 530 families in all since it started in 2003. The idea behind it is simple and so beautiful: A week in the Canadian outdoors can help families breathe again, reconnect, rebuild, move beyond the cancer.

**Brandon had been treated for a malignant brain tumour when he was four.** At six, he was found to have basal cell carcinoma due to a rare genetic condition called Gorlin syndrome. Now 15, he's had hundreds of lesions removed—he visits [The Hospital for Sick Children](#) in Toronto every three months, having three or four lesions removed each time. Each procedure leaves stitches and scars. There's no cure, only the ongoing management of the disease for the rest of his life. His grandmother calls the scars Brandon's badges of courage; his mother calls her boy with her husband's dark eyes and wicked sense of humour a "trooper."

## How Cottage Dreams was born

The woman behind Cottage Dreams, Seana O'Neill, is a lean, intense woman so driven that she has to take her latte decaffeinated. But her rigid shoulders soften at the mention of the Pearsell family. **"This kid, you sure know he's been through a battle of epic proportions, yet there's a grin on his face,"** she says.

Brandon is something of an ambassador for the program, which O'Neill thought up in 2002 while at the cottage she and her husband had bought that summer in the Haliburton area northeast of Toronto. It was two weeks before Labour Day. With her infant son Jackson beside her on the dock asleep in his car seat, she watched Jaiden, 2, toddle about the beach at the close of another perfect day. The family had spent a wonderful summer there after living two years in Winnipeg. But it was time to go back to Toronto; time for O'Neill to find a new contract job in the film business; time, soon, to close the cottage. And that didn't make sense to her. The cottage was winterized, yet it was going to stand empty through glorious fall days and the first snowfall. **Somebody, she thought, should be there, enjoying their beautiful place, but who?**

Until her beloved elder brother, Kevin, died in a car accident at age 19 in 1983, O'Neill's world had been golden. Her father was a lawyer, her mother a nurse. Mom and the three kids spent summers at their cottage at Lake of Bays in Muskoka, where there were cousins and friends, regattas and dances. "But after my brother died [when she was 17], I floundered for five years," she says. On top of that, her mother fought [breast cancer](#) and her parents' marriage failed. Even though her mom survived, the family was torn apart. **"Cancer brings fear and sadness. Everyone in a family is devastated, not only by the diagnosis but by the treatment."**

O'Neill drifted until 1988, when she and Kevin's girlfriend travelled for six months through Southeast Asia and Europe. She came back believing in herself, and 14 years later, had forged a successful career as a production coordinator, married and had two small sons. **That's when she realized what she should do about the cottage sitting empty: lend it to someone who, like her mother, had faced cancer.**

A lawyer friend poured cold water over her idea. "So I got another lawyer," she wisecracks. She was unstoppable (and still is: now separated and 43, she lives and works Cottage Dreams and her BlackBerry at all hours). **She knew she was onto a good thing after she had a cottage rental agent send out 100 notices and within two weeks got back 10 replies from owners willing to lend out their cottage.** "People were getting it," O'Neill says, "because everyone

The figures of two boys are outlined by the glow of the setting sun. All skinny legs and promise, the brothers —Brandon, 12, and Ryan, 9—stand shoulder to shoulder on the dock, intent on a school of skittering fish just out of reach of the hot-dog bait on their fishing poles.

Making dinner in their borrowed cottage on Balsam Lake, near Haliburton, Ont., their mother glances out the kitchen window at them—and weeps. **Patricia Pearsell knows she is seeing a perfect childhood moment of barefoot summertime freedom.** For the first time in nine years, this family from Whitby, Ont., is on holiday from medical appointments, hospital wards, and the very large shadow of Brandon's cancer.

## How the Pearsells found their cottage

Three years later, Pearsell, 43, still thinks of that day in July 2006. "Brandon was getting a chance to be just a kid and Ryan was getting to simply have fun with his brother," she says. They'd been gifted—that's her word—a week at a stranger's cottage, made possible by an Ontario-based program called [Cottage Dreams Cancer Recovery Initiative](#). It operates on \$400,000 from corporate and individual donations, grants and the proceeds from special events, including golf

has been touched by cancer."

Among the CEOs and professionals O'Neill cold-called was Esther Green, chief nursing officer at [Cancer Care Ontario](#). "I thought this woman was brilliant," Green recalls. "Seana understood cancer from a different perspective: not as a professional, not as part of a support group. Hers was the most innovative idea I'd heard." Working with focus groups had taught Green that cancer patients need time to recover and regroup, that it's often a difficult transition from full-time cancer patient to survivor. Some 166,400 Canadians were diagnosed with cancer last year, but what's often lost in that chilling fact is the flip side: **There are between 750,000 and one million cancer survivors in Canada, many of whom could use some time and a special place to get accustomed to what Green calls their "new normal."**

### Behind the scenes at Cottage Dreams

A summer storm is threatening as O'Neill settles herself at a table on a restaurant patio outside her office in the small Ontario cottage-country town of Haliburton. In airy second-floor quarters, her staff of three is busy matching clients to cottages. **When owners sign up online to donate cottage time, trained volunteers visit**, taking photos and making notes for the cottage profile. Applicants have forms to fill in, including a medical summary and liability waiver, plus a wish list that includes the preferred location and week.

Not everyone is accepted. "The program celebrates recovery," says O'Neill. Patients must be within 18 months of finishing treatment; the program doesn't take palliative care patients. Still, **150 families got a week at a cottage last year**. One was the Pearsells, thrilled to have the gift again, this time a lakeside cabin surrounded by tall trees. Pearsell sent O'Neill photos of faces the family made with food their first night (Brandon's giddy idea), Ryan leaping off the floating dock, and the boys in the paddleboat with Rayne, their dog.

This year, O'Neill lost a major corporate sponsor due to the downturned economy. That was a blow; Cottage Dreams receives no government operating funding, except for the salaries of three summer interns. Says Green with a sigh, "If I could fund them, I would."

### Steps toward a bigger future

But O'Neill waves an impatient hand. **This year she will extend the program until the end of December**. She has well over 450 Ontario cottages on file as well as offers from owners across the country, and has a plan to get funding so she can take advantage of offers she's had from condo owners in Alberta's ski country. Plus, she's had inquiries from England and Australia. "It's so exciting. As soon as we get long-term, sustainable funding, we can offer the program across Canada" and potentially to other countries.

And, oh, how she is working on that. She alternates her time between Toronto (where she hopes to find more funding partnerships) and Haliburton. She leans across the table on the patio, oblivious to the rain starting to fall as she describes a seaside retreat in Australia. "Oh my God, I just got goosebumps."

*Pictured: The Pearsell family, from left: Patricia, Brandon, Mike (standing) and Ryan.*

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