



Woman of the Week, July 27, 2009: Seana O'Neill



In 2002, the view from the dock looked pretty good to Seana O'Neill. Sitting by the lake at her new Haliburton, Ontario cottage, the mother of two began to think about how she could share the good life with others. She had an idea: Why not offer her cottage to patients recovering from cancer, so that they might find the same restorative properties in cottage life that Seana herself had experienced?

From a career as a production coordinator, Seana knew how to think on her feet. Working and travelling all over the globe gave her insight into what the constants are in successful organizations. The result of her life experiences is Cottage Dreams Cancer Recovery Initiative, a program through which cottage owners lend their cottages to families trying to rehabilitate after cancer treatment.

WP: What inspired you to start Cottage Dreams Cancer Recovery Initiative?

SO: I was inspired as a result of feeling grateful for having a cottage and two incredible children. I felt I had the world by the tail and I wanted to give what I could...My family had endured two incredibly painful and emotional times that were impacted by time at the cottage and my husband and I had just bought a new cottage. It seemed right to base my giving on what I felt deep down inside.

As a young adult, my mother was diagnosed with breast cancer and my beloved older brother was killed in a car accident. Each time, it was time away that allowed me the time and place to think straight and decide how I would move forward. This is what Cottage Dreams has provided to hundreds of families across Ontario; time away from doctors and appointments to enjoy each other, think about their past and their future while having fun doing cannonballs off the dock

or sipping wine in a hammock.

WP: You've been a successful producer. How do you balance your life with working toward your charity's goals?

SO: Like any independent business, running Cottage Dreams is a more than a full time job; the work is part of my life and lifestyle now. Being a single mother to seven and nine-year-old boys, as well as previously working in the film and television industry, has given me my time management skills, patience, drive, and ability to use every hour of the day to accomplish goals. The work at Cottage Dreams is easy because at the end of the day, we meet brave, generous, and grateful people, and aside from the obvious financial crisis and donations being way down, I rely on the staff and board to remind me that the hard work truly makes a difference. The key is to believe deep down that you are where you are supposed to be and the rest falls into place.

WP: What does your perfect day look like at your own cottage?

SO: A perfect day is being at the dock with my sons on a sunny, hot day. They are swimming and I am with them enjoying them, the view, listening to my iPod while trying not to think about what I have to accomplish for Cottage Dreams!

WP: Who or what is your support system?

SO: Professionally, my support systems are the three women who work with me as well as our dedicated board members and advisors. Personally, I have a few very close friends who I seek when times are good and [when] times aren't very good.

WP: What's one thing you've learned from this experience?

SO: One of the remarkable lessons I have learned is that the kindness of total strangers (our cottage owners) is overwhelming to many of our visitors. Our donors lend families their private sanctuary because they want to make a difference, to help using something they know makes their own family feel better. It is a powerful feeling to play a part in this.

WP: What's next on your personal to-do list?

SO: Like many: exercise more. Personally, I think it's time to reflect upon personal relationships and what that means after being single for over 5 years.

Interview conducted and edited by Justine Connelly.

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Seana is one of the most

Seana is one of the most remarkable women I know, and I learn something from her every time I see or talk with her. She has the drive and the determination that comes only from an incredibly passionate belief, and knowledge, that she is helping so many suffering families. The emotions that a family struggles through during and after cancer, cannot even be imagined, and the wonderful work being done by Cottage Dreams is nothing short of a god-send. Generous cottage owners make this possible, for without them, there would be no place for others to reflect on their blessings.

Thank you Seana and the rest of the team at CD!

P.S. We are proud to be a supporter of Cottage Dreams in our own small way. For every cottage rental we

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