

A sanctuary for hope and healing

Name: Seana O'Neill

Hometown: Haliburton, Ontario

Recipient's Related Charity: [Cottage Dreams](#)

How Seana O'Neill inspires others:

Cancer. It fractures the lives of families, can bring financial hardship, interrupts work schedules and taxes families emotionally. While the health-care system provides patients with the support they need while in treatment, it stops when they finally walk out the doctor's door. Cancer survivors have to find a way to rebuild their lives. This is when Seana O'Neill and Cottage Dreams takes over. The registered charity connects cancer survivors and their families with donated cottages, providing, at no cost, an opportunity for cancer survivors to move on to emotional, spiritual and physical recovery. Whisked away to a natural setting, families are removed from the doctor appointments, hospital visits and other harsh and exhausting realities of their illness.

Seana O'Neill knows from personal experience these intimate details of loss and distress after watching her mother and two uncles battle cancer. So as she sat on her Haliburton, Ontario, cottage deck in 2002, an idea came to Seana that would not only change her life, but give hope and healing to hundreds of people living with the disease. It was Labor Day weekend and Seana was at a crossroads in her own life, not sure if she wanted to go back to her film career in Toronto. In the end Seana decided she would like to share her cottage with those who would not otherwise have the opportunity to get away. She was inspired to invite cancer survivors to her cottage when she wasn't there —and thought other cottagers might do the same.

Seana's passion and commitment galvanize people. From the grassroots support of local families in cottage communities to major corporations, government and cancer research organizations, she's brought people closer. She says she's still amazed she was able to pull it together, but at the same time she had faith in her abilities to get the job done.

In the beginning Cottage Dreams accepted only those in the recovery stage —within nine months of the treatment's completion. After talking to other people who could use a week's respite, however, Cottage Dreams has extended its focus to include people in the middle of treatment and, in one case, a father of three young children who had an inoperable brain tumor. The doctors said if the man was placed within three months, he would still be well enough to enjoy himself.

Ask Seana what she's most amazed by, however, and she says she's been inspired by the inherent goodness in the people Cottage Dreams touches. One woman, a single mother undergoing chemotherapy, once told Seana to go ahead and give her space to someone else. "I'm sure there are more deserving people out there than me," the woman e-mailed Seana.

These are the lives Cottage Dreams strives to reach —not just in Ontario, but across Canada. Plans to expand nationwide by 2010 are under way.

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