



#### **A WOMAN WITH A LOVE FOR LIFE**

*by: Maja Rehou*

If you were to pass Marnie Walker on the street, with her mild manner and openness, you wouldn't guess she is the founder of a multi-million dollar transportation company. But, with her wild curls and infectious smile you can tell she is someone who loves people and life.

In high school she was forced to overcome a serious illness that forced her to use crutches and canes for eight years. A situation that might have made others desperate and hopeless, left Walker "fearless and confident, like she could take on anything." This

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experience resulted in an incredible inner strength and a deep understanding of what challenges people with special needs face every day. In 1989, using these insights and the business savvy she acquired from her corporate career in marketing and advertising, she started Student Express Limited, a busing company providing transportation for people with special needs.

It all began with only her visa, a business plan and her ability to see an opportunity that others hadn't. Her goal was to transport people safely and with dignity. She was driven to create a company that serviced a niche market that other companies felt was too difficult.



In that first year, with nine buses, Student Express Limited generated revenues of \$240,000. Today it is a multi-million dollar business employing 295 people, with a fleet of 250 buses generating revenues over \$10 million.

Overcoming her illness was a turning point in her life. Showing her that everyone deserves to be treated with respect, she came to appreciate the diversity of people and the importance of health. Aware of the importance of those who supported

and encouraged her through the many challenges and helped her succeed, Marnie hopes by helping others, she will be able to give back something in return. As a way to give back she helped employees in need, established 'Overcoming Adversity' bursaries for female students at her alma maters, Sutton District High School and the York University's MBA program, and shares her insights as a keynote speaker.

*What is the secret to her success?* Strategic thinking, hard work and a sharp focus. She tries not to get distracted by all of the noise around her. Walker says it is very easy to get side tracked from your goals, and suggests taking a break to rejuvenate and clarify one's thinking.

She has a summer home on Lake Simcoe with a woodland garden that she calls the

"Magic Forest." It is magical because it is where she goes to clear her mind and get a fresh perspective on things, a place where her creativity has a chance to flourish.

When not strolling through her woodland garden, she and her husband, Bill Fahey travel to various parts of the world to visit art galleries and experience other cultures. Walker thrives on diversity and says it is one of the most enjoyable parts of life. Getting to see and experience other people's perspectives, either through their art or lifestyle, gives her perspicacity into how other people view the world.

Marnie Walker was ranked 45th in Profit and Chatelaine's Top 100 Women Business Owners of 2003, a finalist, and the only Canadian, in New York's Enterprising Women awards, and a finalist for the 2004 Ernst & Young Entrepreneur of the Year Award.

Walker has recently sold Student Express and is pursuing other business opportunities.

To learn more about this fascinating Woman Within, visit her website at [www.marniewalker.com](http://www.marniewalker.com).

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