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Marnie Walker takes on Toronto



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Marnie Walker

She took on Toronto, one student at a time. What's in store for tomorrow?

By Carley Sparks



Marnie Walker is smart. Intimidatingly smart. A Dean's list York University MBA graduate and the 2004 Rotman Entrepreneur of the Year, Walker has made it her business to be on top of the heap.

I met Walker on a cold winter morning at her sparsely furnished St Clair and Yonge office in downtown Toronto. The shared office space is headquarters to Walker's next big, but as yet unknown, move. On the door hangs a pale green suit jacket, because as

Walker says, it is not enough to have a good idea. "You have to present yourself in a manner that gives you credibility as a businessperson. That includes your department and dress." (I am wearing a sweater and rubber boots).

Until a few months ago Walker owned and operated Student Express Limited, a Richmond Hill-based transportation company specializing in students with special needs. Founded in 1989 on her personal credit card, Student Express was the vehicle that transformed Walker from a largely unknown corporate executive to an entrepreneurial heavyweight. In 2004 the company—complete with a fleet of 250 buses, 295 employees and full-service transportation depot—grossed over C\$10 million in revenue. She sold the business last year, but held onto the depot.

Walker's story begins in Sutton, Ontario, a lake-side town about an hour from Toronto. With one younger sister and two brothers, she is no stranger to gendered expectations. "I came from a very traditional family. My father felt that grade 12 was all a woman

needed, so going to University itself was a rebellion. Going into the Business program [at Western University] was more forbidden fruit." Breaking the mold became a pattern that would define her life.

After completing the MBA program at York University, Walker went on to work for a handful of mid- and large-sized corporations, among them Columbia Records, Foster Advertising and Bell Canada. "I was looking for diversity in experience." She

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credits this broad exposure for her ability to see opportunities in any environment. As a woman in typically male dominated fields, it was also where she cut her teeth, as it were, in corporate Canada. "I was sort of a novelty. I had to be very sensitive to how I dressed, spoke, and behaved. I found that I couldn't be involved in a lot of the things that my male colleagues did because I had to establish a role as a businessperson first."

It was during her days at Foster Advertising she met Tina Breckenridge, a woman who would come to define Walker's ideals. "Tina had a tremendous influence on me. She was the first woman I met that I felt did it all. She was very feminine and accomplished in what is considered to be woman's traditional role—the home, decorating, entertaining, food, the arts—but also very accomplished in business, academia and the world. And she did it in a time [the 30's–50's] when women really did not have the opportunities they have today."

What struck Walker most was Breckenridge's fearlessness. "She was very strong in her own views, and never shy to debate or confront an issue." A trait that Walker would like to see more women embrace. "As women we tend to be peacemakers. We avoid confrontations. I think this holds women back tremendously in business because you must confront issues and be able to bring your ideas to the table even if they are not in the mainstream. Debate and confrontation can be positive learning experiences."

In fact, in many ways Walker's community work is a testament to this independent spirit and, most certainly, to her ongoing commitment to forwarding the female cause. "Little girls are often still brought up, or are exposed to the culture, where they are not expected to take a leadership role; where they are supposed to be the caregiver, peacemaker or take a supportive role and

most of all be 'good girls.' Often they are not encouraged to be Prime Minister of Canada or chairman of the board." To help women who have overcome significant challenges further their education, Walker established "Overcoming Adversity" bursaries for female students at her alma maters, Sutton District High School and York University MBA's program. She also works with the Learning Partnership and the Women's President's Organization, and is on the advisory boards for the IMC program at the University of Toronto, Rotman School of Management and the US-based publication *Enterprising Women*.

What is perhaps the best example of her pioneering vision is the business itself. Walker saw an opportunity where she could have a competitive edge, and service a niche market providing transportation for students with special needs. "Nobody wanted to transport these children because it was difficult." At the same time, she felt this niche would be the most immune to budget cuts. Landing a contract for eight routes worth \$240,000 in revenue with the York District School Board, *Student Express* was born.

But the birth of the company was not without challenges, first and foremost being financing. Divorced, with no capital and a heavily mortgaged house, she used her business plan and school board contract to secure financing from the bank for her buses, her VISA to lease an office and buy furniture, and her corporate job to fund growth for the first five years.

Finding affordable insurance was also problematic. "The insurance companies basically told me that if I had a documented safety program that was approved by the government, they could then give me better rates." So she did exactly that. "I actually wrote the program and got certified." Not only did the move drive down the costs of insurance, Walker was able to



train drivers to suit her niche. Beyond technically driving the bus, the program included segments on student behaviour management and special needs.

In one year the charter day trip department grew 45% and struggled to keep up with the volume of calls. To fix the problem, Walker assembled and empowered a nine-member team. She invited each person in the supply chain to treat the others as if they were customers not co-workers. “The strategy helped put a new perspective on the interactions,” says Walker. “It took nine months, we changed process and technology.” The approach paid off. The company could handle greater order volume, and better served its customers.

This team approach to problem solving would prove to be a tremendous asset in employee retention and business growth. “The biggest challenge was always developing the team. It is important to have the right people and to create an environment where they feel that they can make a difference. I believe that comes from the leader.” The result was low turnover in a notoriously fluctuating industry. Where some transportation companies struggle to retain staff, Student Express often had wait lists of drivers.

“When you create a culture where everybody wants to do a good job and feels important, then you have to ensure you bring in the right people, support them, and give them an opportunity,” says Walker. “I tried to hire for whom the person is and what they want to do rather than for their technical skills.”

To keep abreast of change, Walker again turned to her team. “The world is changing quickly and a lot of companies have a difficult time managing that change. What I tried to do was have a lot of problem-solving done in groups by the stakeholders that encouraged change in a non-threatening way. We would get together and talk about what was working and what was not. And then develop and implement ways to fix the problems. If the idea didn’t work, we would try something else, if it did we kept doing it.” Rather than finger pointing and blame laying this process made employees feel part of the solution and created an environment where people weren’t afraid to identify problems, make suggestions or try something new. “What was not okay was to keep doing what was clearly not working.”

Though widely lauded as a risk taker, Walker maintains she is a conservative. “I love change and am always looking for new challenges but from my point of view, I am not a risk taker. Before I commit to something, I do in depth analysis so I am 100% sure that it is going to work. Then all that I have to do is to make it happen. The greatest risk is to me is to not take advantage of the opportunities of life and to be haunted by ‘If only I had.’ If you know your idea is a good one. What are you risking? Why are you not pursuing it? Why are you giving up? Don’t worry about having all the answers, as long as you are moving in the right direction, you can fine tune along the way.”

While looking for her next opportunity, Walker is working with National Express, the company that bought Student Express, as an adviser and sharing her ‘lessons learned’ at various speaking engagements. Whatever it is that comes next for Walker, it is guaranteed to be a tall order. “If I am going to do something, I want to be the best in the business. I apply that to most things in my life. I do the very best I can.” ■