

Richmond Hill bus company founder named entrepreneur of year finalist

BY JOHN SLYKHUIS
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When Marnie Walker became seriously ill while in Grade 13 at Sutton District High School, she probably didn't expect any good to come from it.

She was forced to use canes and crutches for eight years.

"It marks you for life, but in a positive way," Ms Walker said. "It left me fearless and confident I could take on anything. Had I not become ill, who knows where I would have been?"

Probably not in charge of a multi-million dollar business in Richmond Hill with 295 employees and probably not a candidate for Ernst and Young's Entrepreneur of the Year award.

As a result of those years with canes and crutches, Ms Walker grew to understand first-hand what people with special needs face every day of their lives.

Meanwhile, she pursued an education in business, graduating from York University with an MBA. She went on to careers in marketing and advertising with major corporations.

Armed with personal experience and business savvy, she saw a niche market opportunity to serve people with special needs. The result was Student Express, a school bus company that provided transportation for students with physical and developmental challenges. No other bus company wanted anything to do with something they thought was too risky.

Ms Walker knew otherwise.

She used her Visa card to lease her first office and buy furniture. Divorced, with a heavily mortgaged home and no capital, she approached the banks with a business plan and her first school board contract.

The banks agreed to finance the first nine buses and nine employees, but balked at going any further. Knowing she would need more to grow the business, Ms Walker kept her regular corporate job, using her salary to expand Student Express. She also managed to secure alternate financing.



PHOTO/GLEN BROWN

Marnie Walker built her bus company into a multi-million dollar business with 295 employees. She has been named a finalist for Ernst and Young's Entrepreneur of the Year award.

That first year, 1989, the company had revenues of \$240,000 and there was no looking back. The service was expanded to include students in special ed and gifted programs, French immersion, private schools and child care centres, seniors homes, high-risk organizations and at-risk individuals. She grew the company further with an acquisition that quadrupled its size and further entrenched her position in the marketplace.

With an emphasis on customer service and recognizing the value of its staff, Student Express managed profit and growth when other sectors of the busing industry saw declines and bankruptcies, surviving the SARS epidemic, as well as soaring insurance and fuel costs.

That corporate philosophy includes a maxim that revenue growth at any price is not a strategy. The company's aim is maintaining its reputation with existing customers and using a conservative approach to growth and financing.

The corporate logo on her buses provided hundreds of mobile advertisements and brand recognition for Student Express.

She has never forgotten her alma maters, presenting Overcoming Adversity bursaries to female students at Sutton High and York.

In addition to being a finalist in the Ernst and Young Entrepreneur of the Year awards and a finalist in the University of Toronto Rotman School Women Entrepreneur of the Year awards, Ms Walker was a finalist and the sole Canadian, in the Enterprising Women Awards in New York last May.

Profit and Chatelaine magazines ranked her and Student Express as 45th in the top 100 top business owners in Canada in 2003.

The awards will be presented Oct. 7 in Toronto and Ms Walker said she is taking her entire office staff with her to the banquet.

"They are very much a part of the success," she said.

The Ontario award recipient goes on to compete with top entrepreneurs from the Pacific, Prairies, Quebec and Atlantic regions for the national Entrepreneur of the Year honour. The national winner will be announced Nov. 4 in Ottawa.

Today, Ms Walker is on to other challenges, selling Student Express last month, but staying with the company as a senior advisor.

"I love to start and build businesses and the challenge of bringing a team together. I'll find another niche in the market," she said.