



North Toronto Town Crier

ON THE GO: Marnie Walker with one of the buses she's leaving behind after selling her transportation company.

Photo by Jonathan Spicer

Her business had an impact on local economy, says university

But despite the award and financial success, Marnie Walker is leaving the busing business

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For 15 years, North Toronto resident Marnie Walker massaged her infant business venture into a giant in Toronto's transportation industry. But despite having just received a prestigious award for her work, she's left it all behind.

"Personally, it was a very difficult decision — but (it opened up) a good business opportunity, which is why I went ahead with it," Walker says, her entrepreneurial spirit shining through the nostalgia.

It's only now, having won the award and moved on, that she's beginning to reflect on her achievement. "It's kind of overwhelming," Walker says. "You just start building a business and you don't realize what you've done until you've achieved it."

What she achieved was Student Express, a transportation service for

people with special needs attending schools, special programs, camps and other interests in the GTA. From a start-up company with eight buses and nine employees, it bloomed into an industry leader with 295 employees, a fleet of 250 buses and revenues this year of more than \$10 million.

It was partly these impressive numbers that persuaded U of T's Rotman School of Management to present Walker with the Impact on Local Economy Award, and name her among the 41 award recipients since 1992. It was also partly the fact that Student Express was able to grow in an industry that was declining.

But Walker is used to swimming against the current: In her teens, she suffered a serious illness that forced her to use canes and crutches for eight years, an experience that informed the character of Student Express. The experience also fostered

a determination and boldness to adapt her business for new markets.

"That was why we were able to grow," Walker says, stressing the message she delivers in lectures at local universities and colleges.

She says there is a tendency among young entrepreneurs to be satisfied with creating a new business but neglect its prospects for growth.

"To build a business is different than starting a business," she says.

National Express, a British-owned coach network, purchased Student Express two months ago. It then replaced it with Stock Transportation, another of its recent buy-outs, which delivers similar services in the Richmond Hill area.

"I hadn't really planned to sell the company at all," says Walker. "I really loved what I did and it was going very well."

But she said the sale offered tremendous opportunities, one of which was a chance to look at starting up another business — "to put the team together and build it," she said, "because that's what I really like to do."