

Forest Hill's Person of the Year: Belinda Stronach

The area's courageous, controversial & charismatic health crusader

BY MARY GAZZE



Belinda Stronach is a philanthropist, power broker, socialite, former public servant and our area's latest high-profile resident. Sitting in a Yorkville coffee shop close to home — her long, straight blond hair hanging over a soft-looking magenta sweater with matching scarf — she talks of her recent trip to Haiti. She and partner-in-charity Wyclef Jean watched as a group of Haitian former child soldiers stood up on their graduation day. They were finally turning their lives around after being forced to commit crimes for people who threatened to kill their families.

All they wanted now, they said, was a washing machine so they could have clean clothes. Stronach and Jean agreed to buy it. Small gesture, big impact. Today, over coffee, she is elegant, urbane and radiant — and looks about as far removed from the slums of Haiti as one can get.

And that's exactly the dichotomy at the heart of our choosing Stronach as Village's Person of the Year for 2009. She's been fodder for tabloids and Ottawa gossip and painted as a spoiled heiress to a rather robust family

fortune. Indeed, at 43, Stronach possesses the wealth and connections to do just about anything she likes. But it's her decision to put her privilege to good use, to quietly and consistently help others in need — from a hospital in Toronto to a small village in Africa to a school in Haiti — that makes her so deserving.

"I feel very fortunate in that, when you have the resources and the means and the platform to effect change, I think you have a responsibility to do that," Stronach says, pouring a cup of green tea.

Like those former child soldiers, she has dreams. One of them is to help people in poverty. It's one of the reasons she established The Belinda Stronach Foundation. It works with other organizations and focuses on helping girls, women and Aboriginal youth as well as fighting malaria.

In conversation, Belinda Stronach is honest and optimistic. She says that she's been lucky in life and does what she can to help others who aren't so fortunate.

One of the focuses of her foundation is to help underprivileged girls in developing countries get an education.

In September, Stronach's foundation and the Clinton Global Initiative formed a \$1 million partnership to help NGOs and the private sector co-ordinate efforts to get issues faced by women and girls on the agenda at next year's G8 and G20 summits in Huntsville and Toronto. Her foundation plans to launch the One Laptop Per Child program next year and this year secured \$2 million from private companies toward the goal to provide a computer to every Aboriginal child in Canada between ages six and 12, so they can get online and connected with the world.

She's also heavily involved with Malaria No More. Her foundation raised more than \$2 million in 2009 alone as part of its commitment to send 250,000 malaria prevention bed nets to Liberia and Rwanda through Spread the Net. It is now only 75,000 nets short of its goal. Stronach says she hopes her efforts are successful.

"I'm an optimist by nature," she explains. "I look at the future and how I can look at the past." But sometimes it seems her personal life has been splashed across the front pages more than her charitable or business deals.

She was in the papers when her relationship with now Defence Minister Peter MacKay fizzled after she famously crossed the floor from the Conservatives to join the Liberals. Later, the wife of former Leaf Tie Domi filed divorce papers accusing her husband of having an affair with Stronach.

Stronach managed the gossip swirling around Canadian water coolers with grace and dignity. "What doesn't kill you makes you stronger. There is some proof to that," she says with a laugh. "You have to really self-evaluate what is important to you and be able to look in the mirror at the end of the day. I'm comfortable with my decisions, with my principles, and I can't worry about the judgments others make," she says. One of those decisions was which treatment to choose when she found a lump in her breast two years ago.

Several surgeries, a mastectomy and a breast reconstruction later, she is cancer-free. "I feel better than ever," she says. "I was always really health conscious beforehand, and now I'm more health conscious. I probably say 'no' a little more often than I used to."

Now that she's recovered, she helps others who are going through cancer treatment. She hosted Live to Tell, an intimate concert with singer and breast cancer survivor Sheryl Crow in May. The show raised \$375,000 toward a new breast cancer centre at Sunnybrook Hospital. She isn't shy about revealing she wanted a surgery that would save her nipple, which wasn't available in Canada at the time. So she went under the knife in the U.S. "At the time, the surgeries, the outcomes that I was offered didn't involve keeping the nipple, and that was important to me as a woman," she says.

Since her recovery, she has raised \$2 million to establish the Belinda Stronach Chair in Breast Cancer Reconstructive Surgery at Toronto General Hospital to help bring this type of surgery to Canada where it is covered by OHIP.

"I think I'm a very positive person. On one hand, I think I can be a very shy person, which is interesting, but on the other hand, if it's a good cause you find the energy and the strength to put to it," she says.

With her second chance, she continues to follow her dream of helping those in need. She also encourages young people who have their own ambitions to follow their passion and stick with it. "Don't be afraid to dream big because if you can't dream big you won't get there," she says.

"You don't have to wait for everything to be perfectly in line. I've met many great entrepreneurs.... They had a dream, they had a passion. They didn't have all the answers, but they figured it out as they go along," she says. One way she says young people can learn to find their passion and become socially engaged is to witness poverty with their own eyes.

"You take less for granted when you see a woman sitting on the side of a desert road digging for water."