

Tara Torchia-Wells  
Turning a Crisis into a Gift for Others  
by  
Brian Campbell

Sometimes a major crisis in a person's life causes them to take a step back and evaluate where their life is going and what their priorities are. This is exactly what happened to Tara Torchia-Wells. She had been juggling a career in event management at the Convention Centre with raising a busy family when, in 2012, she was diagnosed with breast cancer.

After taking time off to recover from treatment, Tara returned to work, only to find that it didn't feel right anymore. "I was a different person. Things had changed for me," she says. "My perspective had changed. Working in a corporate atmosphere no longer made me happy and I felt as though I wasn't accomplishing anything."

So she left her job and went into business for herself. "I decided to take a business course through the Women's Enterprise Centre, wrote a business plan and here I am," says Tara.

Tara's business is unique, as it targets people who have cancer along with their families and friends. She says, "When I had cancer I found that it was very overwhelming trying to find all the things that you need. So I thought it would be easier for others dealing with a cancer diagnosis if I could provide many of these items in one store."

Tara named her store 'The Unexpected Gift', which has occasionally caused some confusion. "Some people think it's a maternity store," she says with a smile. "But what cancer gave me was a chance to slow down and take a look at my life and see what I could change. It allowed me to appreciate my relationship with my husband and children far more. It made me re-evaluate what was really important to me. So it was an unexpected gift."

The process that led up to Tara opening The Unexpected Gift, began with a blog that she started writing shortly after her cancer diagnosis. "My friends, family and co-workers were all concerned with how I was doing, but I found that I kept

answering the same questions over and over, so I started writing a blog and those concerned could check the site,” she says. “The blog became my therapy. I wrote exactly what was happening on a daily basis, like a diary. It was very therapeutic and cathartic.”

Eventually, she decided to give up the blog, but more things happened that she felt the need to write down. “So someone said to me ‘why don’t you put it into a book,’” Tara says. “So I put it into book form, made it flow, and I wrote the rest of what I needed to write; and I think self-publishing cost me less than therapy would have!”

Tara had her book launch at McNally Robinson in October, 2014. The book is entitled ‘The Compression Garment Diaries, Breast Cancer, an Unexpected Gift.’ She explains that, “a compression garment is what they prescribe for you after surgery. I talk about them often in the book because they’re horrible. They cause...discomfort. And now I fit people for them. It’s interesting.”

The Unexpected Gift will be celebrating its first anniversary in July, but even in its short history, the word has spread very quickly. The originality of the store drew a lot of attention when it first opened, which helped Tara get started, but that is not what she counts on. “Word of mouth is really important, and that is beginning to pick up now,” she says.

For the most part, the Unexpected Gift targets women dealing with cancer. “From the beginning, I wanted to be inclusive, however I have a very high female clientele,” Tara says. “It is women who are affected by Chemotherapy and are losing their hair; or women who have a mastectomy or lumpectomy and they need the proper prosthesis or breast form and clothing so their body image is restored. Since I have experienced hair loss, having a mastectomy and reconstruction, chemo and radiation, people who come to the store know that I get it, and I think that helps.”

Tara carries a full range of mastectomy wear by Amoena, which includes bras, leisure wear, sportswear and a variety of bathing suits. These items are all made so that a breast form fits inside them. Tara is part of the Manitoba Breast Prosthesis program and a certified bra and breast form specialist. The Unexpected Gift also carries a wide variety of wigs, scarves and head wear.

“I also see a lot of friends and family who want to help their loved ones. I feel that I can offer suggestions or advice as to what may be helpful,” she says. “Sometimes

the suggestion is not even part of the store, it is a resource that could help, or a cleaning services, or a food service; it is not always about selling something. I want to offer help and support in whatever mode it comes in.”

Makeup and personal care products are also concerns for those going through cancer treatment, and The Unexpected Gift has a large supply of safe, carcinogen free personal care products. Tara says, “I carry products specifically for people undergoing chemo and radiation called Lindi Skin. These products are mild and soothing and use non-toxic ingredients. Chemo and radiation can have a very damaging effect on your skin; these products help.”

Tara even carries home care products that many people may not even consider. “The majority of candles that you buy are made of paraffin, and paraffin emits a carcinogen. And they are very often scented with chemical scents,” she says. “So if you can change your scented candle to a beeswax candle that burns clean or a soy candle with an essential oil that burns clean, those are the small choices that you can make.”

Not only does The Unexpected Gift offer products for people dealing with cancer, they offer a number of spa services as well. “We have an esthetician who does safe, non-invasive manicures, pedicures and facials,” Tara says. “This means that we don’t do any cutting of cuticles during a manicure or use a razor to shave off calluses during a pedicure. This reduces the chance of infection, especially when your immune system is compromised. Everything we use is a single use implement. When someone is going through chemo their blood count can be very low, which means their body has a difficult time fighting infection. We want women to feel that they can still be pampered in a safe, hygienic and compassionate environment”

Other services offered are Massage Therapy, Reflexology and Reiki, making The Unexpected Gift a full service store for people with a cancer diagnosis and those that are simply concerned with the products that they are using on their skin.

The Unexpected Gift is already getting positive reviews from its customers. Tara says, “I have women come in shopping for a friend, but had breast cancer themselves in the past saying, ‘I wish this store had been around when I had breast cancer’.”

For Tara, starting The Unexpected Gift was one of the best choices she has ever made. “I finally feel like this is what I am supposed to be doing,” she says. “It’s a really good change and I’m happy I did it.”

Outside her business, Tara loves to spend a lot of time with her family, watching her younger son (Griffin) play hockey, going to their trailer near Gimli in the summer with Les, her husband of almost 20 years, her older son Sid, and Griffin,. They also spend a lot of quality time at home. “We are very much a homebody family, we hang out at home a lot together,” she says. “We also have a solid group of friends that we spend time with. It is nice to realize the important people in your life and make time for them.”

Tara and her family are now living in the house she grew up in. “Tuxedo has always been home for me, even when I didn’t live here,” she says. “It’s fun to watch my kids playing in the backyard where me and my sisters did. It’s neat being back and knowing the neighbourhood so well.”

These days Tara is learning to slow down and enjoy the important things in life, her family, her home and using her experience to help others who are facing the same crisis. She says, “Cancer taught me a lesson. I was too caught up in things. Now I make the effort to pay attention to what is really important.”