



A Woman for All Seasons

By Anne Pappmehl

Financial planner Susan Creasy knows the secret to having a well-balanced life

Mention the word success around the Kingston area and the name Susan Creasy easily springs to mind. The fact that she owns and runs one of the most profitable financial firms in that city, servicing more than 800 clients, is singularly an impressive accomplishment. Add to that her reputation as a stalwart contributor to her community, caring and attentive mother to a teenage son and daughter, and sought-after public speaker, and one could say that Susan Creasy's life is a meticulously executed balancing act.

Known as much for her genuine concern towards her fellow human beings as for her financial and business acumen, Creasy's volunteer profile puts many paid professionals to shame. Creasy has sponsored and received foundation grants for several charitable organizations she is involved with and sits on the CNIB Kingston District Endowment Committee. She also serves on the organizing committee of the Doug Purvis Golf Tournament, an annual event raising scholarships for economics students at Queen's University and the University of British Columbia. She has been a major sponsor of the Festival of Trees since 1992 and chair and co-chair of Kingston General Hospital's Black Tie fundraising event. Additionally, Creasy finds time to teach "Project Business," a Junior Achievement program, to Grade 8 students at Perth Road School and works with younger students teaching them "Business Basics."

This matchless ability to manage so many diverse areas of her life has earned Creasy numerous awards, accolades, and recognition. Last year, she was honoured by the Kingston Whig-Standard newspaper in its "Women in Business" 2001 issue. In 1999, she was awarded the Paul Harris Fellow, a Rotary International Award, and in 1997, Creasy was the first Canadian recipient of the Life and Health Insurance Foundation for Education award. For the past 20 years, she has been the recipient of the National Quality Award.

Creasy admits that her initial foray into the financial industry in 1980 came about "sort of by accident." A graduate of Queen's University with a combined Bachelor of Arts/Bachelor of Physical Education degree in 1977, Creasy obtained a Bachelor of Education degree from McCarthur College in Kingston the following year. However, upon graduation, a scarcity of teaching jobs forced her to look elsewhere for work. Wanting to stay within reasonable traveling distance of Kingston, where her husband Dave was working on a Ph.D., Creasy took a job as program coordinator for the local YMCA. However, it was during her previous summer job in 1977 and 1978 that Creasy learned something significant about herself while working for the Ontario Ministry of Culture and Recreation. "I was running their youth employment experience programs and managed a budget of a couple of million dollars and had a territory that went from Ottawa to the west side of Belleville. I realized I enjoyed being my own boss."

By 1980, having felt she had gone as far as she could at the YMCA, Creasy applied for a position for marketing manager with Canada Life, despite the fact that she knew little about the insurance industry and selling. "I had never sold much other than working at Eaton's in Toronto as a teenager and delivering the Globe and Mail as a child. I guess I was open-minded at the time and felt prepared to try it and learn." She got the job and, fortunately for Creasy, was encouraged by an agency manager who was incredibly supportive of women in the business, which she says was pretty non-traditional even in 1980.

Being her own boss worked to Creasy's advantage. "I was able to choose how many holidays I take." When it came time to start her family, Creasy found the flexibility indispensable, particularly when her children were very young. "I brought the kids into the office when they were two or three weeks old, and met with clients three days a week." With her very supportive manager, Creasy had the opportunity to control the direction of her growth and income opportunities. She received her CLU designation in 1985 and, looking back, Creasy says that responding to that Canada Life ad 22 years ago was "the best thing I ever did."

During her initial 18-year tenure with Canada Life, Creasy identified herself as an independent advisor, although the company paid the rent and took a percentage of her income through their bonus structure to cover expenses. Since then, the industry has come a long way. "In the old days, you were licensed through a company and, if you wanted to broker a case, you had to have what they called a one-case agreement whereby you had to prove that the other company's product was better than what your company was offering," Creasy recalls. "Those days are history now and, with the current licensing, you can place business with any company you want as long as all the elements of good product design and company solvency are present, enabling me to

meet the needs of the client."

As the industry evolved from a traditional agency to a brokerage-directed system, Creasy decided in 1998 to become more independent. "I moved out and purchased our current location," a 2,500 square foot building located at 621 Norris Court. The elegantly furnished office is complete with three staff: Creasy's brother, who brings his computer expertise to the job and is currently working on his life insurance licence, as well as a full-time business administrator, and a part-time receptionist.

Alongside Susan, her husband Dave Creasy ran a successful environmental consulting business until his sudden death in April of 2001, an experience which Creasy describes as "moving from textbook to reality." Though understandably a difficult time, Creasy has emerged from this personal tragedy with a deeper appreciation for the value of the advice and service she has been providing to her own clients over the years, as well as a renewed sense of purpose and commitment to her profession.

Relationship-building, based on mutual trust and understanding, is a big part of Creasy's style. She feels those qualities will continue to serve her well as the financial services industry continues to transform itself. "The emphasis has got to be on relationship-building between clients and practitioners," says Creasy. "I know there will be consolidation and mergers, but I honestly believe the clients are more interested in dealing with me rather than with the company I might or might not represent. As long as you can be trustworthy, honest, and operate in your client's best interest, you will survive. I never recommend something to my clients that I wouldn't put my parents or my children in."

In building client relationships, Creasy likes to go the extra mile. For example, she recently purchased a number of books on the history of the local Cataragui Golf and Country Club to give to her clients who are interested in golf. Thanks to a sophisticated database management system, from which she was able to generate a list of all her golf-playing clients, Creasy can extend the "know your client" proviso to a more personal level. "Doing something like this for your clients is worth its weight in gold."

Caring for her clients is a constant Creasy theme. In her presentations and speeches, Creasy has been known to say, "people don't care about how much you know, they want to know about how much you care." While Creasy is not knocking the importance of advisors being well informed, up to date, and experienced, she does feel that "if you had the choice between a rocket scientist or _a person who really cared and who is intelligent, I think the second person would have the more successful career." While Creasy admits that one can overdo the generosity towards clients, she feels that if done to the right degree, it's a great way to distinguish yourself from other advisors.

And distinguish herself she has done and continues to do, as well as find time to have a personal life. Aside from caring for her two teenagers, Creasy maintains her interest in athletics through golf in the spring and summer, and downhill skiing and curling in the winter.

As for the teaching degree she completed 24 years ago, Creasy feels the effort was not wasted. "I find it really applicable. A lot of my practice is about teaching people how to learn to move forward in their investing and learn about what they're doing and why they're doing it. A large part of this business is educating people so that they are in a position to make informed decisions. Ultimately it creates a better client relationship. As I often say to people, 'I don't want to be a dictator or an order taker.'" Given her penchant for establishing meaningful two-way communication with her clients, that's likely something Creasy never has to worry about.

As for her secret in managing such a busy life, Creasy's formula is fairly simple: choose a good professional team, take enough time for yourself, and set your own agenda.

Anne Pappmehl is a Toronto-based freelance writer and investment research consultant. She can be reached via e-mail at apappmehl@netrover.com.

Advocis

350 Bloor Street East 2nd Floor, Toronto ON M4W 3W8
Tel (416) 444-5251 Fax (416) 444-8031 Toll-Free 1-800-563-5822
<http://www.advocis.ca>