

Future of YMCA family in hands of a **Family Man**

Peter Sweeney says his upbringing and personal values mesh well with the work of the organization

BY LYNN HADDRALL
PHOTOGRAPHY BY MATHEW McCARTHY

The leader of the region's YMCAs tweeted a sweet message on International Women's Day to honour his sisters.

"I am grateful to the six head-strong, smart, passionate, and take-no-crap sisters who raised me. #yesisaidsixsisters," Peter Sweeney wrote on Twitter.

Replied his sister Peggy: "And we take full credit for all your successes!"

The playful exchange acknowledges the huge role others have played in Sweeney's life.

The chief executive officer of YMCAs in Cambridge, Kitchener and Waterloo is the youngest of 10 children – six girls, four boys. He understands why it's important to stay connected even if the span between

youngest and oldest is 20 years.

"You know that old saying, 'It takes a village to raise a child?' I grew up in that village," Sweeney says, smiling through an interview at the A.R. Kaufman YMCA. He jokes that seven mothers raised him.

Sweeney grows quiet as he talks about his love and respect for his late father, John, member of provincial parliament for Kitchener-Wilmot from 1975 to 1990. He encouraged Peter to set ambitious goals and take chances. In the summers, John would take the children camping while Peter's mother, Kay, would get her well-deserved vacation – by staying home.

"I was singularly influenced by growing up in a large family. We were very much grounded in family," says Sweeney.

His desire to connect with others extends to his professional career. Sweeney took the



Peter Sweeney, chief executive officer of Waterloo Region's YMCAs, stands in the new location of the Teen Drop-In Zone on Hespeler Road in Cambridge.



Clockwise: Peter Sweeney, his wife, Krista, and children James, Claire and Paige.

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‘It takes a village to raise a child?’
I grew up in that village.”*

PETER SWEENEY
CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER OF WATERLOO REGION YMCAs



Peter Sweeney sits on his mother Kay’s lap, next to his late father, John, who served as an MPP for Kitchener-Wilmot. Peter’s siblings, from left to right, Maureen, Cathy, Peggy, Steven, Eileen, Mike, Mary Ann, Shelagh, Tim.

top YMCA job in September 2016 upon the retirement of longtime chief executive John Haddock.

The organization’s strategic plan had run its course by the time Sweeney arrived. It was time for one of the largest non-profit organizations in Waterloo Region to re-examine its future.

But first Sweeney wanted to get to know YMCA staff and the people they serve, because it was all new to him. He had never been inside a YMCA.

He said when word of his new job spread he was amazed by how everyone he encountered had a Y story to share.

“The notion of a Y story is very foundational to this place. It’s very powerful. I was like – I don’t have one,” Sweeney recalls. “But I have lots now.”

Although he was a stranger to the Y, the work of the organization fit nicely with his background in the non-profit and health-care sector.

“Certainly, within a very short period of time it became clear that my personal value system and what’s meaningful to me is very consistent with the work we do here.”

Sweeney, 45, and his wife, Krista, have three children – teenagers Paige and James, and Claire, 10. Sweeney worked at St. Mary’s General Hospital for 15 years, starting as communications director before spending 12 years presiding over the hospital’s foundation. In his last six years there, he ran the foundation and was also responsible for an international outreach program based out of Hamilton, part of the St. Joseph’s Health System.

Working with the outreach program sent him to Haiti, Uganda and Guyana. They were “life-changing trips” that taught him the importance of “doing good work, not just doing work that feels good.”

He recalls a hospital in Kampala, Uganda. “It’s pretty life-altering to walk into a hospital in a developing country where they just don’t have access to everything that we would here. We went to the maternity ward

and this hospital was one of the busiest birthing units in the world.”

What really hit him was seeing a room filled with broken incubators, each donated by a well-meaning organization such as a service club or church. Without maintenance, parts or a bio-medical engineer, the incubators were useless.

“The nurses in this unit had to look at this stuff every day and be reminded that good intentions only go so far.”

Sweeney wants to make sure the YMCA’s good intentions translate into action.

“What was really important to me coming in here is to take the time to understand the culture of the place and interact with as many people as possible. I was very intentional about being visible and asking a lot of questions. What I certainly didn’t want to do was come in pretending that I had any of the answers.”

Connecting with others is at the heart of the work Sweeney does today. His position gives him a vantage point on community needs ranging from babies and toddlers to youths, seniors and newcomers. He spent his first year talking to staff and getting their input on a new strategic plan.

Debbie Hoekstra, vice-president community services at the YMCA, is responsible for programs serving immigrants, job-seekers, young children and teenagers. She recalls a meeting Sweeney held at the Teen Drop-In Zone in Cambridge. He asked the teens what they needed from the YMCA. They responded frankly and directly.

“One young man speaks up and he says, ‘You know, Peter, we really need smoothies every day,’” Hoekstra recalls. “And then he said, ‘You need to help me understand why my friends are killing themselves.’”

Addressing the first issue was easy. The next day the YMCA sent more blenders to make more smoothies.

“A smoothie gives them something that fills their tummies that they normally might not get at home, which is fresh fruit, veg-

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etables, yogurt and all those good things,” says Hoekstra.

The second issue required a more complex and nuanced response.

“What it encouraged us to do is make sure all of our staff are trained in safe talk; we have people who have suicide first-aid, different things of that nature, because we’ve had a lot of that kind of activity that the young people are trying to navigate.”

Although the Teen Drop-In Zone is at the Chaplin YMCA in Cambridge, as many as 30 per cent of the teens come from Kitchener and Waterloo, spending an hour or more on public transit to attend. Hoekstra and Sweeney would like to see a similar program in Kitchener and Waterloo.

While you might associate the YMCA with fitness or camping programs, it also provides child care, immigrant, and employment services.

“The Y is a well-known brand, but it’s not necessarily well understood,” says Sweeney. “It does so many things. The Y does very few things on its own. It’s very much a partner-based organization.”

After conversing with staff about the Y’s role and its aspirations, Sweeney presented a slim booklet to them this spring. The new strategic plan is entitled “This is Y.” It has no spreadsheets or long-winded mission statements. The focus is on three strategic intentions:

- We will make our YMCA a great place to work.
- We will foster meaningful human connections with intention and purpose. Every time.
- We will think and act as a movement.

Implementing a youth development strategy reflects the last intent. Sweeney recognizes that the concept of “thinking and acting like a movement” raised eyebrows.

“The YMCAs been associated with the word ‘movement’ since its beginning. It’s a 160-year-old organization. In Canada, it pre-dates Confederation,” he says.

“Movements change the world.

Movements respond to community needs. I don’t know what the community will want from the Y in five years. For sure I don’t



Peter Sweeney chats with Anthony Ramsay, team lead of youth programs at the Teen Drop-In Zone on Hespeler Road in Cambridge.

know what they need from us in 10. But I suspect that they are going to need us and we need to be ready, we need to be able to harness all of our assets to respond.”

The YMCA has 723 staff, increasing to 844 in the summer camp season. There are also 610 active volunteers. Last year, this team connected with 100,000 people in Waterloo Region, half of them younger than 18.

“There’s one demographic that we touch in every single area – youth. So, the first way we are going to think and act like a movement is we are developing a youth strategy.”

Hoekstra is leading the team focused on youth. She’s optimistic about improving the lives of young people in Waterloo Region.

“We’re trying to connect newcomers and struggling learners with kids who are natural-born leaders. The more you get them to just be youth and have fun together, it doesn’t matter anymore and they start to see possibility,” says Hoekstra, who has worked with the YMCA for 31 years.

She likes the new strategic vision for its

simplicity and direction.

“We can all make meaningful human connections every time. We can all think and act like a movement. And if we look at creating connected communities, it sounds pretty simple. That’s what I know from the staff teams I work with; it has really resonated with them. They see their place in it.”

Sweeney hopes to encourage more philanthropy to support ideas and programs that will emerge in the coming months.

“I’m having conversations with as many people as I can around what does an investment in wellness prevention look like in this community and what role can the non-profit sector play; we bring to that the human expertise.”

He points to a wellness program called Rock Steady Boxing. It’s offered by partnering with companies and the Parkinson’s Society. About a dozen people of varying ages participate.

“What they’ve found, almost counter-intuitively, is that certain patients with Parkinson’s benefit greatly from high-intensity physical activity. It is unbelievable the outcomes that we are getting for these patients who are experiencing both physical and psychological mental benefits.”

Sweeney feels initiatives such as this offer opportunities for public investment and more philanthropy from private and corporate partners interested in health and wellness.

“Interestingly, and perhaps ironically, when you do meaningful work, it actually feels pretty good. But when you put the meaningful work first, it’s pretty powerful stuff. You realize despite all of our differences most people just want the same basic things: they want a better future for their kids.”

That message resonates with Sweeney, a father of three who grew up in a large family.

The man who never set foot in a YMCA until taking on its top job is now immersed in its lore and legacy. He’s determined to keep it relevant and connected for years to come. Just like one big family. 



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