



above: Paul Newman established The Hole in the Wall Gang Camp in 1988.

below: Clea Newman at Double H Ranch.

SeriousFun Is Doing Some Serious Good

Westport Native Clea Newman Carries on Her Father's Legacy

BY JILL JOHNSON MANN

When Clea Newman was 25 and growing unsure of her plan to attend law school, her father, legendary actor and philanthropist Paul Newman, gave her some advice. It was soon after he had opened the Hole in the Wall Gang Camp in Ashford, Connecticut, serving kids with chronic illnesses and their families. "He said, 'Maybe what you need to do is not focus on yourself, and go and volunteer as a counselor,'" recalls Clea. "I always joke that



I drove in to Hole in the Wall a bit of a spoiled brat and drove out, ten days later, a completely changed person."

This is no doubt a revelation common to the 20,000 to 30,000 volunteers annually at the 30 camps and programs in the SeriousFun Children's Network—a global movement that grew out of that first camp. Paul Newman's mission, in 1988, was to create a place where kids could escape the fear and isolation of their illnesses and

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“raise a little hell”—all at no cost. He wanted children with serious medical challenges to feel like carefree kids at camp, and parents to be reassured that the medical support needed was on hand.

“My dad used to go to camp all the time, and he’d say, ‘What amazes me is that you go to camp and you give 1,000 percent of yourself, and what you realize every time when you’re driving home is that you’ve gotten back 5,000 percent,’” says Clea. “It just reminds you what’s important in life. It really changed my whole thought process.” After that counselor experience, the Sarah Lawrence grad worked as a development associate for the camp for three years. Plans for expansion were already in the works then, because a waiting list had begun to form. “My dad couldn’t bear the thought of any child having to wait a year to get to camp,” says Clea.

“I felt so drawn to it, but I also felt like I needed to go out and kind of spread my own wings,” she says. A serious equestrian, Clea took on the role of Director of Development for Pegasus Therapeutic Riding. At the same time, she was introducing a therapeutic riding component at Hole in the Wall. She then worked as Director of Development for Giant Steps, a school for children with autism. “Kathy Roberts at Giant Steps was a wonderful mentor,” says Clea. “Then my dad asked me if I would oversee his philanthropic legacy.”

Clea joined the boards of Hole in the Wall and then SeriousFun, when it was formed in 2001. Soon the CEO urged her to come on full time and, after an attempt to juggle both SeriousFun and Giant Steps, Clea realized the growing SeriousFun network needed her full attention. She has been a vital ambassador for the organization ever since.

SeriousFun now includes nine camps in the U.S., five in Europe, one in Japan, one in Israel and partner programs in India, Africa and the Caribbean, plus pilot programs. As of 2023, almost 220,000 children globally had been served some serious fun by SeriousFun. “The coolest thing is that my dad’s hundredth birthday would have been January of this year, and right around that time we served our two millionth childhood experience. Because some of our campers come back, it’s not two million children; it’s actually the two millionth life-changing childhood experience,” explains Clea.

The first campers had cancer and blood-related diseases, including HIV, “at a time

when almost nobody was serving kids with HIV,” says Clea. “We were actually serving kids at Hole in the Wall from Europe, including the Chernobyl disaster. We serve kids who are pretty sick, who can’t really be served anywhere else.” SeriousFun now can handle more than 100 life-threatening illnesses, some of which are very rare. No child is left out, and if that means nine different versions of S’mores, due to diet and allergy restrictions, so be it!

One of Clea’s favorite memories from camp was helping to cheer up a few nine- and ten-year-old boys who at first were resistant to

letting a “girl” anywhere near their cabin. “They became my absolute buddies. I spent almost the entire session with them,” recounts Clea. “They kept saying to me, ‘You’re taking such great care of us.’ I said, ‘I’m not taking care of you. We’re just having fun together.’ Then we were running through the woods and I got horrible poison ivy all over my legs.” For once, it was their turn to take someone to the infirmary. “They were so excited to be able to take care of me. They washed my legs down and put calamine lotion all over me. They talked about it for three days,” says Clea. “So these little boys who were struggling with so



above: Clea Newman with two campers. **below left:** Paul and Clea Newman.
below right: Paul Newman getting ready to go fishing with a camper.





above: Clea Newman and campers at Double H Ranch. **right:** Clea Newman.

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much, the greatest story for them at camp was that they got to take care of their counselor." Those boys, who had never been with other kids with their same illness until camp, "remained really close friends," she says.

Clea has idyllic memories from growing up in Westport. "It was artistic but very small then," says Clea. "Gristedes was still on Main Street, and you could sign for your sandwich—everyone had house accounts. It was just so cute. The Remarkable Bookstore and Klein's, and Ships was everyone's favorite burger joint, Compo Beach and Longshore. We used to go to the Playhouse all the time. Westport allowed us more normalcy than L.A. We could run up and down Main Street and in the woods and be normal kids, not worried about being chased by paparazzi. It was like growing up in a '50s TV show. It was lovely. Most of my very, very best friends are from here."

Growing up with Paul Newman and Joanne Woodward as parents was not notable to a kid who "didn't know any different," says Clea. "They were amazing parents. They worked a lot, so they were gone a lot. But when they were home, they were incredibly hands-on parents. They helped with homework, and we all made meals together and sat down for dinners together."

Clea also recalls spending "so much time at camp," once Hole in the Wall opened. "My parents were kind of a force for good from as long as I can remember," she says. "They were always very active in things they cared about. They spoke to us often, even when I was a little girl, about how it was really important, being as lucky a family as we were, to give back to your community—and that community could be small, like your town or school, or big like the community of the U.S. or the world." Clea seems to have turned those "ors" into "ands," giving back across the board.

The latest research is finding that what SeriousFun provides is not just wonderful memories, but "they almost negate the negative experience of having a life-threatening illness," explains Clea. "We now have family weekends, sibling sessions, bereavement sessions, conferences with all of our doctors and staff, hospital outreach. So our programs run year round. We're not just reaching our campers during the summer, which I think Dad would be really excited about."

To learn more, donate or volunteer, visit: seriousfun.org