



What My Father, Paul Newman, Taught Me About Giving

My dad's greatest role may have been the one he played behind the scenes, as a tireless philanthropist

By Clea Newman

Published November 20, 2025



A legendary actor and visionary philanthropist, Paul Newman founded The Hole in the Wall Gang Camp in 1988 so children with serious illnesses could just be kids. This year marks what would have been his 100th birthday. COURTESY SERIOUSFUN CHILDREN'S NETWORK

My dad, Paul Newman, loved the challenge of acting and the sheer thrill of racing cars. He was also a great listener with an incredible work ethic. That's probably why he was so successful in both his film and racing careers. (OK, he was pretty handsome, too.) It's also why he was so well-suited for another role, one more behind-the-scenes than on the stage.

Clea Newman serves as ambassador for SeriousFun Children's Network, founded by her father. COURTESY SERIOUSFUN CHILDREN'S NETWORK

In the last decades of his life, Dad truly came into his own as a philanthropist and founder of [SeriousFun Children's Network](#), a global community of camps for kids with serious illnesses. This year marks what would've been Dad's 100th birthday, so I've been reflecting more



than usual on the things he loved, [the lessons he shared](#) and how he inspired the world along the way.

I'm often asked how our camps came to be. In the 1980s, we had a close family friend who was receiving cancer treatment at our local hospital. While Dad was there, he met numerous parents and children who were going through difficult treatments. He saw how those kids were so isolated from their friends, schools, sports and birthday parties for many weeks or even months at a time. Their families were feeling isolated as well.



Clea Newman meets with children at Double H Ranch in the Adirondacks, one of the camps in the SeriousFun Children's Network. COURTESY SERIOUSFUN CHILDREN'S NETWORK

That experience sparked an idea. Dad knew he couldn't promise good health to those kids, but he could try to give them a bit of their childhood back: the pure, unencumbered joy and freedom of camp. Dad was always a big kid at heart, and he had great memories of his own childhood camp experiences. So he set out to give children with serious illnesses a place where they could let loose and play — or, as he liked to say, “kick back and raise a little hell.”

Then came the hard part: making it happen. But when Dad set his mind on something, he always found a way. He knew he couldn't do it alone, so he gathered like-minded, passionate people to help. That first camp was up and running in an astounding 18 months.

Today, SeriousFun has more than 30 camps and programs around the world. Each camp has first-rate medical care and is completely free of charge for campers and families. For kids facing some of life's toughest health challenges, these camps are where “no, you can't” becomes “yes, you can.” It's a true testament to Dad's bold vision and generous spirit.

Dad's attention to those in need became more focused in his later years, but it was hardly a new trait. Even when no one was looking, Dad was supportive to friends and complete strangers. Even now, decades later, I still run into people who pull me aside to share a story of how his quiet generosity changed the trajectory of their life. He'd pay someone's college tuition, buy a stranger a bicycle, cover someone's mortgage. His accountant used to joke with him about cutting back on his giving, and Dad would just ignore it.

In film, when he thought his female costar wasn't receiving fair compensation, he would negotiate for equal pay, even giving up some of his own in the process. He regularly negotiated extra perks in his film contracts, then would skip the perks and quietly donate the money to a local shelter or school. He always did it anonymously because he felt that if you were lucky enough to live a good life, it was just part of being a good person to help others, expecting nothing in return.

Clea Newman and her father, Paul Newman, shared a love of horseback riding. COURTESY SERIOUSFUN CHILDREN'S NETWORK

As I get older, I appreciate all the lessons he taught me. They've shaped me into the person I am today, and I'm so grateful. I always try to listen with intent, act generously and surround myself with great friends and family. When you give time, resources and love, fulfillment comes back tenfold. As Dad put it, "I'm not running for sainthood. I just happen to think that in life we need to be a little like the farmer, who puts back into the soil what he takes out."



The first time I understood that fully was in my early 20s. Like many young adults, I was trying to figure out a direction for my career and my life. Dad and I were similar, so he knew if he told me what to do outright, I probably wouldn't "hear it." Instead, he had a way of dropping suggestions, and they would usually stick. One was for me to volunteer as a counselor at our first camp, the Hole in the Wall Gang Camp, in Connecticut.

Just as camp changes the trajectory of our campers' lives, it definitely changed mine. I walked into camp looking inward and walked out, 10 days later, looking outward. The joy of those kids, despite their illnesses, and the care they showed each other and their counselors, reset my perspective. It really recalibrated my whole sense of purpose.



Clea Newman joins the fun at Double H Ranch in 2013. COURTESY SERIOUSFUN CHILDREN'S NETWORK

Since then, my journey to becoming SeriousFun's ambassador has been a long one. I wanted to make my own way through the philanthropic world, so I dedicated myself to a few special organizations and learned as much as I could. Luckily, I had great mentors to guide me.

A few years before my father passed, he asked me to oversee his philanthropic legacy of the camps. I think he knew I was ready to come "home" again. Going back to SeriousFun was just what I needed, especially after he passed. I miss him so, but every time I go to camp, I see his playful and generous spirit everywhere.

Our camps were his happy place, and — like father, like daughter — they're my happy place, too.

Camps were her father's happy place, says Clea Newman. COURTESY SERIOUSFUN CHILDREN'S NETWORK



AARP essays share a point of view in the author's voice, drawn from expertise or experience, and do not necessarily reflect the views of AARP.

Clea Newman serves as the proud ambassador for SeriousFun Children's Network, a global organization of 30 camps and programs founded by her father, Paul Newman, that has provided more than 2 million free, life-changing experiences to children with serious illnesses and their families since 1988. Inspired by the values instilled by her parents, Clea found her passion in philanthropy early on, beginning her work at The Hole in the Wall Gang Camp and later serving on SeriousFun's Board of Directors as chair of the Development Committee.