

## PERSONAL EXCHANGE

# Daria Blackwell

Winner of the 2011 HBA Star Award



**Birthplace:** Philadelphia, PA, USA  
**Marital Status:** Happily Married  
**Children:** Sadly, None  
**Occupation:** Healthcare Marketer and Educator, Marine Author and Speaker  
**Years in Industry:** Enough to have acquired some wisdom (36 years)  
**College:** New York University, Washington Square and University College  
**Now Residing:** In the magical west of Ireland, outside of Westport on Clew Bay in County Mayo  
**Current Interest:** Starting a new company on the other side of the Atlantic called Knowledge Clinic, Ltd.

### If you could have lunch with any person, living or dead (other than a relative), who would it be?

I would love to discuss the theory of Gaia with James Lovelock. I would disagree about a few points; but I am fascinated and in total agreement that Gaia is a single integrated and delicately balanced organism that will take care of herself when the time comes by ridding herself of the problem – that's us – to reestablish the balance. I'd like to hear his point of view on what we can do to ensure human survival. His analysis suggests that Ireland will be a good place to do that from.

### Do you have any pets?

We have a black cat, our cruising kitty, Onyx, who has been sailing with us since she was six weeks old. She has great sea legs. She is best at napping, however, and was a real comfort on our Atlantic voyage.

### What do you know for sure?

I know I am going to die and, when I do, everything I have done for some reason will become clear to me.

### What three adjectives best describe you?

Passionate, adventurous, strategic, reinventing (Oh that's 4, I don't follow rules really well either).

### If you could work doing anything in the world, regardless of the income, what would you do?

I have an altruism gene and so does my husband, Alex. We would travel the world helping people

by sharing our knowledge, applying different learnings to different needs. I'd also be a naturalist, because I love to study life on earth and its interrelationships. Perhaps what I learned would help inform the Gaia theory. And I would try to learn to communicate with dolphins, because I know in my heart that I can. Then I would write stories about it all.

### Any hobbies?

I wouldn't call sailing a hobby but rather an avocation. I've crossed the Atlantic Ocean three times in three years on my boat, *Aleria*, a Bowman 57 Ketch, with my husband and cat for company. We wrote a book on anchoring, called *Happy Hooking – The Art of Anchoring*, available on *amazon.com*. We deliver webinars on cruising and anchoring for several organizations including Seven Seas Cruising Association. We visited many nations along the way and gained a serious respect for the natural environment and how it's changing. That's a second passion. Writing is the third passion and they are fortunately interconnected.

### Goals?

To start a new company that will make a difference in the way people interact with their own health management once chronic disease is diagnosed. We are currently developing a pilot study with the support of the Irish government that will test our theories. If they work, we'll be talking to you again next year. If not, we'll probably be sailing the Mediterranean.

### Who has had the greatest influence on your life?

Two people really had major impact on my life:

My sister, Dr. Oksana Korzeniowski, a prominent infectious disease specialist, was my best friend, surrogate mother, and mentor. She died at age 56 of peritoneal cancer. She said to me, "I thought I'd have more time. Make sure you do all the things you really want to do before you run out of time like I have." That's why I went sailing for awhile and why I live my life the way I do today.

My husband, Alex, taught me to be happy with myself just the way I am and to actually do the things I really want to do.

### Who was your favorite teacher?

I had a great teacher for high school physics. She taught us why the sky was blue and many similar lessons, which made science applicable to life and fun. Before that, physics was about totally boring equations that I couldn't relate to in my head.

I also had an ecology professor, Dr. Permuter, who was an ichthyologist. He couldn't tell people apart but knew every single one of his fish by name and each one's relationship to all the others in the tanks. He taught me about the interrelationships of every living thing on earth and how species disappear and reappear for very specific reasons, not all of which are bad.



Alex and Daria Blackwell in Iles des Saintes, Guadeloupe.

**How do you stay fit?**

Alex and I ride our bicycles along the Greenway around Clew Bay...most fabulous bike trail in the world. I also try to walk every day, either on the trails around County Mayo, along the shore in our inlet and on the islands, or up the hill behind our house to check on the trees we planted and see the view from the top across the 365 islands of Clew Bay. We sail on Thursday nights in the local sailing club racing program. It all adds up. I can't stand the thought of Stairmaster these days. I have to get outside.

**Craziest thing you've ever done?**

I crossed the Atlantic Ocean double-handing with Alex in our 57-foot boat...three times. Except it didn't really seem crazy until we talked to people who thought it was. It was a great adventure to us. We sailed up from New York to Maine and across from Nova Scotia to Ireland. Then we continued south stopping in Spain and Portugal, the Madeiras, and Canaries, and then crossed the Atlantic a second time to Barbados. We spent six months sailing the Caribbean stopping to explore many of the island nations along the way. On our third crossing, we sailed back to Ireland stopping in the Azores along the way. It was a magical sabbatical trip that taught us so much about ourselves and other cultures.

The crazy part was that I thought I'd be stepping off the treadmill and wouldn't be able to get back on. Instead what I learned is that people respect what I've done and see it as taking calculated risks, exactly the kind of experience entrepreneurs need. Now we have new opportunities opening up to start a new business on this side of the Atlantic. Who would have thought? And with HBA Europe in place, I have a network to tap into when I am ready.

**How did you get started in the industry?**

I fell into it. My marine biology program at NYU was cancelled so I studied general biology/chemistry instead. I landed a job as assistant scientist at Rockefeller University. I didn't know at the time that they had the highest concentration of Nobel Prize winners in the world. I conducted research on the effects of stress on neurotransmitter release in the brain. I learned that academic bench research was not as pure as I had thought and so I made the switch to industry. I spent about five years at Roche before transitioning to the communications end of the business.

Okay, you got me started.

My career has taken many twists and turns. I started in communications as a scientific writer, and then became a creative writer. When a client asked me to take over the business management of the account, I jumped at the chance. I eventually became President of the agency. Then merged two agencies to form Bozell Global Healthcare.



Daria at the helm of Aleria, a Bowman 57 Ketch, on Clew Bay in Ireland.

At some point, however, I felt a need to become an entrepreneur and started my own consulting business. That went very well, and not only did I become self-sufficient, I also had the freedom to manage my time and my life more rationally. I could spend time with my sister, who had a rare cancer, and with my mother, who also had cancer unbeknownst to any of us. That proved to be the right thing at the right time.

At some point, I developed a specialty in multicultural communications, ethnic communications, and cultural competence in medicine overall. I grew up in an immigrant family and was the first child born in the states. I spoke Ukrainian until I went to school and we lived in a neighborhood comprising many ethnicities so it came naturally. Now, it is integral to a new business that we hope will help transcend some of the difficulties in patient communications.

A pivotal point in my experience was serving as President of the HBA and starting the Europe Chapter. It was a year of change, and we restructured the organization into a global umbrella corporation that allowed much easier formation of chapters. We had 1500 members then and 6200 today. I guess we did some things right. HBA taught me serious leadership lessons. Understanding people's motivations and helping them to reach their goals in return

for satisfying the organizational objectives was pivotal. I matured so much in that time. It released me from having to prove anything and allowed me to ascend to a level of partnership with people around me. It was very interesting. I put it to use at Sudler where I was Managing Partner responsible for the New York agency business as well as all the digital divisions.

And then we moved to Ireland, built a house, then sailed off in a spiral around the Atlantic.

We are now starting a new business based on the idea of rewarding patients diagnosed with chronic disease for participating in continuing medical education. So here we are, working harder than ever.

In the middle of this, the HBA chose to recognize the contributions I made in my years as President of the global organization and as Mentor and Past President to Europe with the STAR award. I am so grateful to the HBA for the leadership opportunities I have had. I learned more about leadership from my years at HBA than in any previous organization. And my double-handed forays across the Atlantic in a small boat taught me the rest. Now, I just have to apply all I've learned.



Daria as President of the HBA addressing the audience at WOTY in 2004.

*Daria Blackwell is C.E.O. and Director of Knowledge Clinic Ltd., Westport, Ireland, and former Managing Partner of Sudler & Hennessey, a WPP Company, New York, U.S.A., as well as the recipient of the 2011 HBA STAR Award. She can be reached at DBlackwell@knowledgeclinic.com or +353 87 954 2514.*