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# CHAPPAQUA

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# How Jen Cook Lives the Dream

By Vicki de Vries

If Indiana Jones were in search of a female counterpart, he could do no better than to select Jen Cook. While never forced to flee the Temple of Doom, Cook already has had her share of “nail-biting” moments—from becoming a certified scuba diver to taking flying lessons, from being first runner-up in the New York Teen Miss America contest to driving a fire truck. And those are only for starters.

Residents of New Castle will know Cook as the president and founder of Lighten Up Massage, which she started in 1995. Ever since, she has been on a crusade to help people realize that “massage therapy is for everyday life because it relieves stress and chronic pain and helps the body to heal.” To celebrate the 15th anniversary, she renamed the business Chappaqua Wellness Center, which now provides such related health-oriented features as chiropractic care, nutritional advice, and electrolysis.

## **Busy, Busy Hands**

A psychology major in college, Cook “just happened” to work for a massage therapist during her college years. After graduation, she attended



Photo by Bill Bramswig

massage therapy school and then opened her own place in Chappaqua. But some people also know her as the generous, warm-hearted person who volunteered her massage therapy skills to help the clean-up volunteers after 9/11. “They were the most meaningful massages I’ve ever done,” said Cook. “I could just feel the pain and sadness through my hands as I touched their bodies. Some of them would talk about what they had seen, and others would just cry. It blew my mind

that here they were doing something so tremendous yet were so appreciative of us.”

Then, soon after Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans, Cook again felt compelled to help: “Having the opportunity to make people feel less alone and more hopeful, just by simply being there with water and food was a time I’ll never forget.” She credits both of her parents for instilling in her a desire to help people.

## **From Le Creuset Pan into the Fire**

Without a doubt, Jen Cook is an inveterate entrepreneur, someone who dreams big and is willing to take risks. While still keeping her massage therapy business in operation, she enrolled in evening and weekend classes at ICE, a well-known culinary school in Manhattan. With a degree in hand, Cook began working as a part-time personal chef—something she had always wanted to do. Then last summer, she worked as an assistant chef on the TV program “Top Chef.”

In the past year, Cook spent an exciting two weeks with a master chef in Florence, Italy,

to learn the art of pizza making. Upon returning to the States, she decided to start a mobile pizzeria that includes a custom-made wood-burning brick oven, which heats up to 850 degrees F. and can bake four small pizzas in two minutes. Thus was born her outdoor pizza business aptly called "Cooking With Fire." Obviously, for Jen Cook, the expression "If you can't take the heat, get out of the kitchen" does not apply, since she has sought out heat in a very real sense of the word.

And as if life weren't exciting enough, this summer Cook won a recipe contest that required a video submission. The "prize"? Being a guest chef alongside Bobby Flay on "Grill It," [to air September 19 on the Food Network].

Now, could all of this passion for cooking be tied to her last name? "Absolutely," Cook admitted. Kids would tease her on the school bus with the same question: "What are you cooking for dinner tonight, Cook?" Her answer was always the same: "Pizza," one of her favorite foods—"a universal food."

Massage therapy... cooking.... Most people follow one main pursuit but not Jen Cook, whose enthusiasm for life and ability to overcome challenges—and sometimes hunt them out—are bordering on legendary.

When her beloved grandfather, a former fire chief, died ten years ago, her way of coping with the sad loss was by be-

coming a volunteer firefighter. "Some of my best memories are sitting with him in the fire truck on parade days," said Cook. So, with a bucket of determination, this 5' tall trailblazer applied as a volunteer at the Chappaqua Fire Department, which was "very supportive" and doubtless, not a little surprised, especially when she announced she wanted to drive



Photo by Joanna Cirasella

Jen Cook with fellow culinary pal Jenny Kmiotek at a Brick Oven Pizza party

the fire truck. "That was the only issue," Cook said, but one she worked hard to overcome by spending many evenings at the firehouse studying every detail of the fire truck.

To sum it all up, Cook added in a humorous vein: "I can stand the heat," and "I not only can start an oven fire, but I know how to put one out." Thank goodness for multitasking.

### **Recipe for True Success**

While being a female firefighter is an exciting "ride" and helps

the community, another important benefit for Cook is serving as a role model. One day, while driving the fire truck, she overheard a little girl shout, "Look, Mommy, it's a girl driving the fire truck!" and the mother reply, "You can do that too someday!" It should be obvious by now: Jen Cook also enjoys breaking stereotypes, a trait she credits to her mother, who was the first female EMT in Ossining.

"Having a very independent, courageous and confident mom has been the ultimate gift in my life," Cook said. "She raised me and my brother, Chris [one year younger] to follow our hearts and dreams. And most importantly, to approach each new task or challenge with the mindset that whether you reach the final goal or not, you've just learned something you can take away and build upon."

This attitude encouraged Cook and her brother to "grab hold of everything we can possibly fit into our lives. This is why I follow my heart with new ideas about how to experience it all." But "going for the gusto" and breaking stereotypes, as important as they are, still don't measure up to what Cook considers her supreme calling in life—being able to help people.

### **"Into Every Life, A Little Rain Must Fall..."**

It may be a truism, but every successful person has learned to deal with hardship in some way. Cook said she and her younger brother, Chris, had

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a wonderful childhood even though her parents divorced when she was 4 years of age, and a few years later, her mother shocked family and friends by revealing that she was a lesbian. "It was not spoken about until my brother and I turned 11 and 12 years old [respectively]," said Cook. "We felt we had to protect Mom from society, but it was not a struggle for us to personally accept her lifestyle choice." In fact, "we were not traumatized by it except that there was a lack of acceptance by the parents of some of our friends, by the school we attended, and by family members."

Cook sees the silver lining in that struggle: "Mom's being 'different' was a gift to us in the sense that both Chris and I are not prejudiced and are risk takers." Learning to adjust to society's unwelcoming attitude toward her mother and to the feeling of being treated as different helped shape Cook's outlook: "The world is a much easier place to live and succeed in, if you can accept all people in spite of their differences and try to find the good in everyone." When turning 16, however, Cook felt so alienated from her parents, especially her father, that she tried to commit suicide. Fortunately, teenagers in a red Ford pick-up truck rescued her from an oncoming train. Eight months in a rehab hospital helped her to deal with her emotional issues, although she angrily told her father, "I never want to see you again!"

"The reason I'm sharing this personal revelation," Cook said, "is to encourage families, many

of whom are struggling with different kinds of issues. Many parents and kids feel alone and keep their struggles bottled up inside like a secret poison that hinders inner healing. Cook believes that many parents and teenagers could be suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome due to 9/11: "Teenagers today were in elementary school in 2001. Back then, the sadness could be felt thick as a fog." Eventually Cook and her father enjoyed a restored relationship: "After a ton of self-reflection and very difficult personal growth on my father's part and mine, I realized my Dad had been traumatized himself growing up. He needed love and support too, and we healed together."

### **A Point of No Return**

Cook now has no regrets, except for a tragically major one—August 9, 2007, the day her father, Greg Cook, was killed by a car that drove ten feet down a sidewalk in Chappaqua before hurling him into a nearby glass window.

Just the week before his death, Cook had decided to tell him, "I forgive you, Daddy." Ironically, they had arranged to meet in town on the very day and at the very spot where he was killed. She also had planned to hug him—"something she hadn't done since childhood" and now would never get to do. Over 300 people attended Greg Cook's funeral. "The love and support from not only friends but also strangers gave me the will and determination to remain in town," Cook said. News of the horrific accident also reached Hillary Clinton,



*Jen Cook served on the panel at the UN Peace Summit for Women in Geneva following 9/11. Pictured here with Linda Evans.*

who said it would be a loss to the community if she moved away. "That just really touched my heart!" said Cook, who is still struggling to forgive the driver whose gross miscalculation cost her father's life and left her and her family devastated by the incalculable loss. Four months later, Cook bought a 1955 Ford pick-up truck, which she still enjoys driving around town. But the truck is more than a novelty: it reminds her of her dramatic rescue when she tried to commit suicide, and is a way to honor her father's memory: "Dad would always tell me, 'I really wish people would make eye contact with passersby and smile.'" Now when she drives down the road, everyone looks up at her and smiles at the truck. "I always smile back and think, 'Dad, they're finally doing it!'"

Her estrangement and eventual reconciliation with her father taught Cook that "kids can come to understand their parents also have struggles, while parents can realize they're not alone" in their battles with themselves and their kids. But not being able to hug her father and say she had actually forgiven him is something Jen Cook will always regret.