

## **Interview with Shadonna Richards, author of *A Gift of Hope: 52 Ways to Live a Better Life***

Today, Tyler R. Tichelaar of Reader Views is pleased to interview Shadonna Richards, who is here to talk about her new book “A GIFT OF HOPE: 52 Ways to Live a Better Life.”

*Shadonna Richards, R.N. is an inspirational writer, author of more than 250 articles, former newspaper columnist and registered nurse. Her work has appeared in the “Toronto Star,” “Toronto Sun,” “Metro—Toronto Edition,” “Word Magazine” and the “Scarborough Mirror” with a combined readership of 2 million readers. Shadonna devotes her time to caring for terminally ill cancer patients. She also has a Bachelor of Arts degree in Psychology and believes in the power of positive thinking. She currently lives in Canada with her husband and son.*

**Tyler:** Welcome, Shadonna. To begin, will you tell us what the purpose of “A GIFT OF HOPE” is?

**Shadonna:** Certainly, Tyler. The purpose of *A Gift of Hope* is to inspire people to live a fulfilling life and realize their dreams regardless of what challenges they may face. I believe that hope is the driving force that moves us forward during our difficult times—and we all experience difficult times at some point in our life. It’s a part of living. Having hope is like a gift of motivation. A dose of encouragement for the soul. That’s why I titled the book “*A Gift of Hope*.” I’m imparting wisdom as a gift from many sources I’ve collected over the years including interviews from courageous individuals who have overcome great odds to my great-grandmother—a positive thinker and cancer survivor who lived to be 105 years old in good health following her remission. I’ve also included a chapter on the recent historical victory of the first black man to be elected president of the U.S.—Barack Obama. The inspiring message: Anything is possible. This will hopefully encourage others to believe in themselves and the power of their dreams. “*A Gift of Hope*” is a series of uplifting messages to encourage everyone that dreams are attainable and our own happiness depends upon what’s within us.

**Tyler:** I understand the “52 Ways” in the subtitle means there’s a lesson for each week of the year? Will you tell us about the plan of the book and how it works?

**Shadonna:** Yes, the plan of the book is for the reader to receive a series of weekly uplifting messages. Basically, each week consists of an inspirational passage—a story of overcoming challenges to achieving one’s dream or simple words of wisdom, followed by a Hope Initiative, and a section to record your thoughts titled “Your Hopes for This Week.”

**Tyler:** Will you tell us about the “Hope Initiative” in each chapter? What is its purpose?

**Shadonna:** The Hope Initiative is basically a practical exercise or suggestion on how one can apply the principles in that week to their own life to implement a positive change in their day-to-day experience.

**Tyler:** Shadonna, would you give us an example of one of the Hope Initiatives?

**Shadonna:** Sure, Tyler. One example would be Week 1—titled Stay Mentally Fit. The Hope Initiative for that week is actually the most involved since it’s the first week and one needs to be mentally fit to make the most of the experiences in life. I basically encourage readers to try the 15 spiritual exercises from that week’s lesson such as Identify Then Rectify. Meaning one should go to the source of their tension and seek ways to rectify what’s really bothering them. The root of their problem. I direct them to a national mental health website where there can do a quick free online survey called “What’s Your Stress Index” as a tool to help them in the healing process. This is followed by Detox Your Mind—I go into detail with the readers on how to cleanse their thoughts on a daily basis. Our minds get polluted every day with negative suggestions and situations—but many of us do nothing to detox our most valuable asset that controls our lives—our minds. I remind readers that “We always have a choice. We can choose to dwell on being hopeless in situations or focus on having hope.” I tell the reader to “Choose hope. Choose happiness. Flush out any doubts or negative thoughts by feeding yourself positive thoughts.” The other Hope Initiatives in the book are more simple such as listing your blessings in the Blessings Journal entry I included at the back of the book and to reflect on the positive experiences in your life. I emphasize that this should be done on a regular basis.

**Tyler:** Why did you choose to divide the book into weeks, especially when so many books offer a daily reading? What about “weeks” will make the book’s goals effective?

**Shadonna:** Well, firstly, the reader can read each chapter a day, if they wish, however the book is set up to reflect on one inspirational message for every week. The reader can reflect on and apply those principles during the week. For instance, in Week 15 titled Count Your Blessings, I encourage readers to record all the good things happening to them—their simple to divine blessings. Each day for that week, they can record positive experiences as they happen in the Personal Journal of Hope—a fill-in-the-blanks section I included at the back of the book along with a worksheet titled Record Your Blessings. This could be as simple as the ability to breathe freely, which many of my patients have difficulty doing, the ability to read this interview, the ability to eat and laugh and think. Your blessing could be your family, friends, good health, your gifts, your home, your job, education, freedom, the list is endless. When we learn to shift our thoughts and energies onto the blessings in our life—the good things happening to us without us realizing it, we are more able to appreciate our life. It’s the glass-half-empty-half-full phenomena. We can focus on what we don’t have or what we do have. It’s difficult to receive more blessings when we are not thankful for what we already have. In Week 3 titled Make Others Feel Special, I encourage readers to make a good impression on those you meet. Be kind and positive. Send out welcoming signals, you’d be surprised at how this often reciprocates back to us. I mentioned my few minutes meeting with Oprah Winfrey after a recording of the Oprah Show in which I was an audience member. I was a 19 year old university student at the time and going through a

difficult period in my life, but her encouragement and positive surge of energy was palpable and has stuck with me like Velcro to this day. You never know how a few uplifting words can make a difference in the life of another person. In Week 7 titled Send An Encouraging E-mail, I quoted Mark Twain by saying that “the best way to cheer yourself up is to try to cheer someone else up.” I’ve even included a space to record up to a dozen e-mail addresses of people you can encourage on a regular basis or at least once in a while along with a few website addresses where the reader can obtain a wealth of inspirational stories, messages or humorous tales and clean jokes.

**Tyler:** What first inspired you to write “A GIFT OF HOPE”?

**Shadonna:** Well, Tyler, I’ve always had a deep desire to make a positive difference and inspire others to believe in themselves and live to their fullest potential. It was natural that I gravitated towards stories of hope and courage. When I started writing my local newspaper column, I wrote inspirational true stories on people who’ve overcome great odds to achieve their dreams, positive role models, courageous individuals making a difference in the world. This garnered a huge response from readers who would submit stories of their own journeys and many have told me how they were inspired by what I wrote and would love to see more stories of that nature. The articles I wrote were like an antidote to all the bad news dominating the headlines at that time. I decided then, as a tribute to them, I would put this collection together of some of the best stories and include other words of wisdom from other sources to empower people to live a better life—to make the best of their life. The book includes many messages including Turn Your Weaknesses into Strengths, my interview with a Polish immigrant with a disability from childhood who was taunted all her life but she learned to cope by turning her situation around. She later built a platform to help others like herself by developing a unique model and talent agency for the disabled. I also interviewed and wrote a story on Kevin Weekes who created his own path in the hockey world by becoming one of the few black goalies for the NHL and he in turn motivates other young people to follow the dream in their heart. Another inspiring interview I conducted was with a young immigrant from West Africa who built her dreams by overcoming challenges, started her own business as a teenager to help busy moms in the community and later became a Harvard Law graduate working at an International law firm in the U.S. As I mentioned earlier, my great-grandmother, a nurse-midwife was given six months to live while in her late 70s after being diagnosed with cancer. She was a positive thinker who believed in living in the moment and keeping her spirits up despite her circumstances, she lived to be a healthy 105 years old, her cancer had gone into remission many years before. There are dozens of inspiring true stories collected in the book to encourage others—to live fully in the moment, to be motivated to overcome their adversity and press forward and to believe that anything is possible.

**Tyler:** I was impressed, Shadonna, by all the details you gave us about how the book is divided up. Would you tell us a little bit about your writing process and how you went from the idea of writing the book to creating the format you chose?

**Shadonna:** Sure, Tyler. Regarding my writing process, most of the time, ideas just literally pop into my head and I scribble them down on notepads I keep around the house. Maybe, the idea or thought was influenced by my day-to-day activity or I may have seen the humorous side to an embarrassing situation that I went through or I was inspired by something or someone. Later, I flesh them out into stories, poems or essays. For articles, most of the time, people would contact me to be interviewed for my column and I would focus on the valuable lessons and personal growth experiences they learned throughout the interview. By the mid to late 1990s I had a plethora of wonderful, inspiring essays and poems, some published, some unpublished and I knew I had to collect them into a book,

one day—especially following the positive responses from readers about my columns in which most of the essays were published. The format of the book sort of came about when I finished the third draft of the book. I just felt that readers could benefit from applying the story to their own lives—hence the Hope Initiative. Basically the Hope Initiative is motivation for readers to reflect on the lessons from the story and live to their fullest potential by applying those principles.

**Tyler:** Among all the inspirational stories you mentioned, is there one you can briefly tell us that really stands out for you, or do you yourself have one hero in particular who inspires you?

**Shadonna:** Gosh, Tyler! (smile) That really is a difficult question. It's really hard to pinpoint just one hero or one inspirational story. There are so many. I've probably mentioned this many times, but Estina Whitter, the now-deceased amazing 105 year old cancer survivor, midwife, caregiver, great mother, and I'm proud to say also my great-grandmother, is definitely at the top of the list. She endured so much adversity and hardship in her life, yet she always managed to keep a positive spirit. She also left behind the most valuable family heirloom, a spiritual legacy of hope, inner-strength and courage. I'm also in admiration of Bonnie, the extraordinary brave young woman whom I interviewed many years ago. Although she was paralyzed from the neck down from the age of 15 by a drunk driver, she has one of the most enduring, positive spirits I've ever come across. She survived against the odds after having 15 major brain surgeries. She always had a smile on her face when I saw her. She refuses to live in pity and focuses on what she can still do, like smile and reach out to others in the community by volunteering her time to help others. She never focuses on what she cannot do but what she can still do. That's a lesson we can all learn from.

**Tyler:** Will you tell us more about your background as a nurse and specifically some of your interactions with patients that inspired you to write the book?

**Shadonna:** Certainly, I work with terminally ill cancer patients who have been informed they have six months or less to live. This is quite a difficult situation, yet throughout my work, I see so many examples of courage and lessons on living well and not taking anything for granted. By this I mean, it's not about the time that we have left, but what we do with the time. These wonderful, courageous individuals taught me that living in the moment and making the most of each precious minute is something that should not be taken for granted. I've seen so many of those brave patients live fully in the moment; many do not look back in regret because they have followed their dreams in life and that is the most important thing we can do. This idea sort of touches on the inspirational message given by the late Randy Pausch who wrote the book, *The Last Lecture*. I've also encouraged readers in the book to view his powerful, encouraging message on YouTube titled "Really Achieving Your Childhood Dream."

**Tyler:** I understand you also write a newspaper column—was that the initial source for your deciding to write this book—did portions of the book begin as newspaper columns?

**Shadonna:** Actually, I wrote my *Perspectives* column, the initial source of many of the stories in the book, between 1994-1996 and 1998-2000 for the *Scarborough Mirror*. Yes, portions of the book began as newspaper columns.

**Tyler:** Would you give us an example of how "A Gift of Hope" could help someone, for example, who is enduring a great deal of personal stress at work?

**Shadonna:** For those who are enduring a great deal of personal stress at work, “A Gift of Hope” offers a great deal of information, encouragement and insight on workplace politics. For instance, I begin the first chapter/week with Stay Mentally Fit and offer 15 motivational exercises to develop a resilient personality which is vital in the workplace. I cite the statistics by the Canadian Mental Health Association and the American Psychological Association which suggested that one in four Canadians cite their work as a major source of stress and one in four Americans have taken a mental health day off to cope with stress—and offer ideas on how to cope with work related stress. I’d written a few columns to address this issue in the past and rewrote them for the book including: Do Your Part to Contain Workplace Gossip, Put Yourself in the Boss’s Shoes, Coping with Workplace Politics and others. Funny enough, I was told that my column on Workplace Gossip ended up being photocopied for an entire organization and pinned up in many break rooms of businesses across the city. I also remind readers that as author/educator/preacher Charles R. Swindoll once wrote “life is 10 percent what happens to us and 90 percent how we react to it.” I believe we may not have control of what happens but we do have a great deal of control over how we react to what happens to us.

**Tyler:** Would you also give us an example, since you worked as a nurse, of how “A Gift of Hope” can help someone who has a terminal illness or who cares for a person with an illness?

**Shadonna:** For those who have a terminal illness, the book offers messages by those who have a similar prognosis—To truly value the time you have left, to live fully in the moment and understand that through suffering there is spiritual growth. The quote that I find most encouraging is “life is not measured by the number of breaths we take but by the number of moments that take our breath away.” To focus on the time you have and those around you that care about you. This message can be applied to everyone! None of us know how much time we have left. We cannot control the length of our life so much as the depth of our life. It’s also crucial for caregivers to seek out resources that are available to them. To give themselves permission to rest and seek respite, especially those who care for terminally ill family members around the clock. Not only is it an emotional time for them, experiencing grief over losing someone close to them, but it can be taxing to the body when a caregiver relinquishes rest. In Canada we have many organizations that cater to those who are providing care to terminally ill relatives and children who have to cope with a dying parent. Some other resources I’ve listed include the Canadian Cancer Society which offers plenty of information, resources and links to support networks. There are similar organizations in the U.S. and internationally as well.

**Tyler:** Shadonna, if you could sum up your message of hope in just a few words or sentences, what would you say?

**Shadonna:** Well, Tyler, it’s quite simple really: “Believe in Yourself! Be good to yourself and others. Believe anything is possible!”

**Tyler:** Thank you for joining me today, Shadonna. Before we go, will you tell our readers about your website and what additional information they can find there about “A GIFT OF HOPE: 52 Ways to Live a Better Life”?

**Shadonna:** Sure, readers can visit my website address which is [www.myspace.com/shadonnarichards](http://www.myspace.com/shadonnarichards). I love to hear from readers and I do respond to mail! This Christmas, especially with the state of the economy, the most precious gift you can give to someone is “A Gift of Hope”! I encourage readers not just to purchase copies for themselves but for friends or relatives. Anyone who could use a dose of hope, a boost of

encouragement or a nice inspirational read while having fun filling in the mini workbook sections on improving your life. I hope my readers will rediscover how to enjoy their life, overcome their challenges, live fully in the moment and realize their dreams. I believe in the power of positive thinking and that a person can change their life by altering their thought process.

**Tyler:** Thank you, Shadonna, for your inspiring message. It sounds like “A Gift of Hope” will be a great Christmas gift.

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