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new trail

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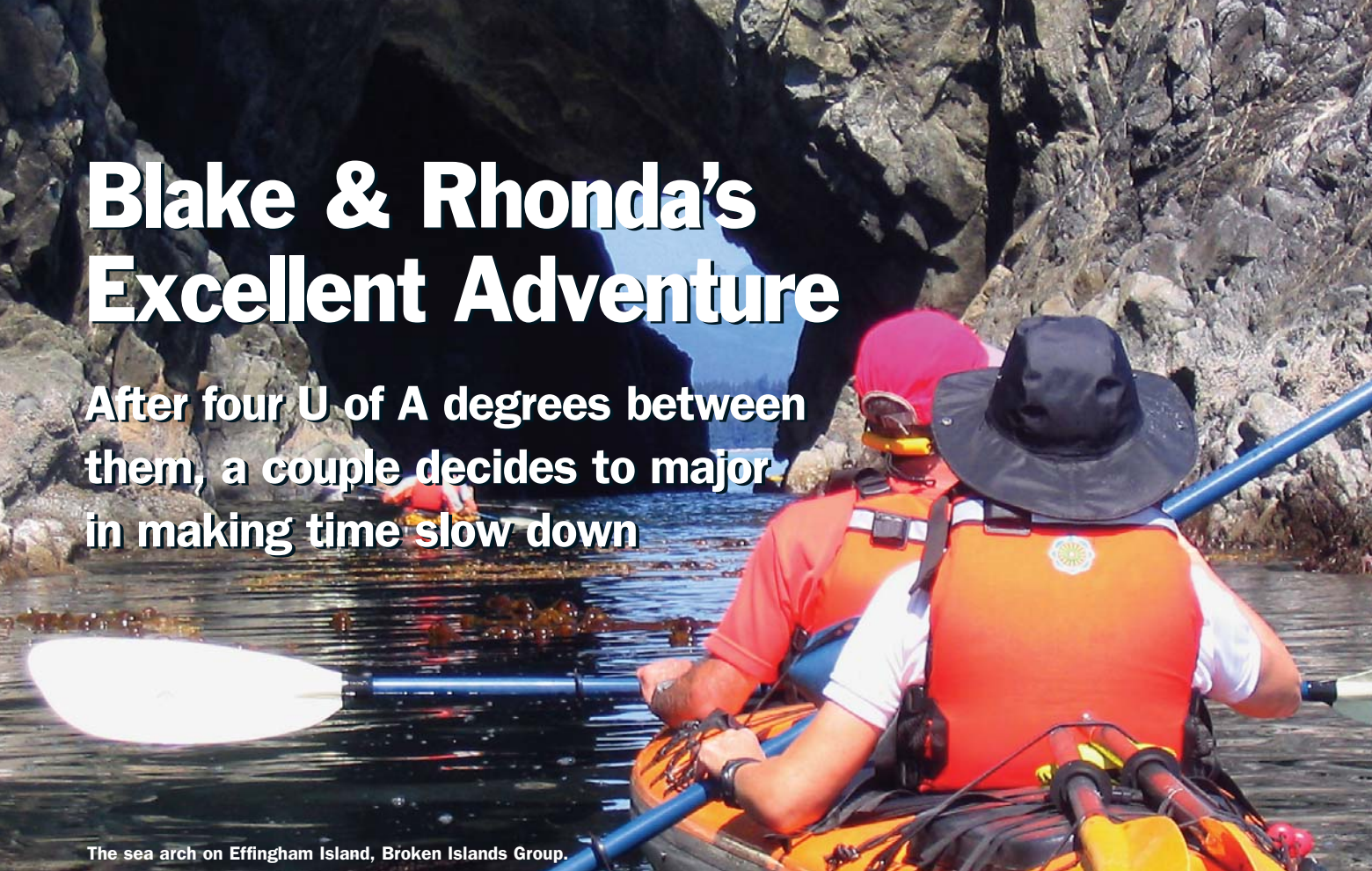
The Way Forward

A vision for the U of A's second century

To achieve our vision of a great university, we rely on shared, deeply-held values that will be the bedrock for our behaviour and guide our actions. These values are drawn from the principles on which we were founded in 1908 and reflect a dynamic, modern institution of higher learning, leading change nationally and internationally.

Blake & Rhonda's Excellent Adventure

After four U of A degrees between them, a couple decides to major in making time slow down



The sea arch on Effingham Island, Broken Islands Group.

It was cold on the U of A campus in February of 1983, but Edmonton natives **Rhonda Johnson**, '86 BA, '90 MBA, '90 LLB, and **Blake Johnson**, '86 BSc, warmed up to one other at first sight of each other's footwear.

It happened in an introductory geography class. "I noticed his wool socks," says Rhonda. "I noticed her boots," says Blake.

The footwear attraction led to their first date at Dewey's in HUB Mall. Feet again played a role in their second date when Blake's turned cold. "He gave me a manila envelope ... and then ran away," recalls Rhonda.

When the suddenly date-less Rhonda opened the envelope she found a homemade card from her now not-so-secret Valentine. "He'd cut out magazine photos and matched them up with corny sayings like, 'It's Electrical!' with a picture of a lightning bolt and 'I've Had My Eye on You!' with a big E.T. eye. How could I not fall for him?"

Fast forward 20-some-odd years—they were married in 1989—and find the happy couple (and their two children) living out their dream in Port

Alberni on Vancouver Island (about 190 km north of Victoria) as hands-on owners of Batstar Adventure Tours, a biking, hiking, but mostly sea kayaking company whose motto is: 'Five Star Service—Billion Star View.'

"When we moved to Port Alberni full time in 2001, we thought we'd landed in paradise," Rhonda says. "We're surrounded by mountains, rivers, the ocean, two beautiful lakes, and over 100 different hiking and cycling trails within a 10 km diameter. But the locals thought we were crazy. Port Alberni was still in recession while Alberta was just starting to boom. Now things are picking up and more people are relocating here."

Their own relocation was a long time in coming as Rhonda began practicing insurance litigation at Edmonton's Milner Steer (now Fraser Milner Casgrain) law firm following graduation from law school and her call to the bar in 1991. She remained there for 10 years while Blake consulted for Apple Computers and caught the desktop publishing wave, eventually running his own graphic design studio.

"The idea to start Batstar," says Rhonda, "was a mutual dream and passion of ours. It grew out of our love for the outdoors and the pleasure we got from sharing it with others."

Rhonda's own enthusiasm for outdoor pursuits was instilled in her from an early age. Her parents, **Joy Finlay**, '74 Dip (Ed), '78 MEd, and **Cam Finlay**, '68 MSc, are avid outdoor enthusiasts who for many years wrote a nature column for the *Edmonton Journal* and have written several nature-related books. Cam, a geologist and ornithologist by training, worked for the City of Edmonton where he received accolades for his work in starting Fort Edmonton and the John Janzen Nature Centre. Joy was awarded the Order of Canada for her work inspiring educators to take advantage of the natural world around them to teach students about science.

With that kind of pedigree it's a wonder it took Rhonda and Blake so long to shuffle off to B.C. and begin the Batstar adventure. (The name of the company was inspired by starfish indigenous to the area that come in a spectacular array of colours.) Ironically, it was

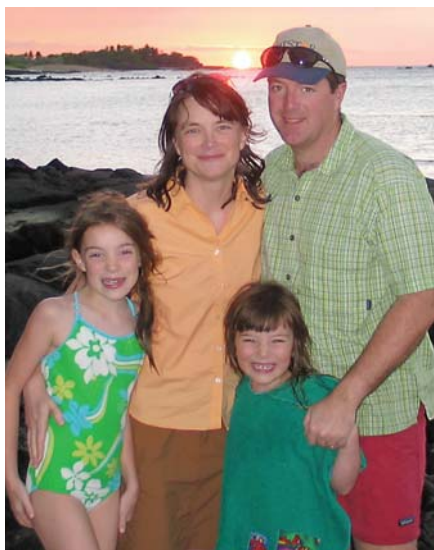
Rhonda's litigation work that indirectly led to the couple finally taking the plunge into total self-employment.

In the early '90s, Alberta lawyers were learning to adapt to a weak economy by marketing themselves more aggressively. Traditionally, that meant lunching and golfing. "It was hard for me to stand out in the lunching department," says Rhonda, "and I was useless at golf. But I loved cycling and I found a few clients who shared that passion.

"Blake and I had done a route called The Golden Triangle—a three day, 320 km route through the Rockies that begins and ends in Castle Mountain Junction (near Lake Louise)—a few times, and I thought it would be fun to take others on that ride. I organized an all-inclusive trip for my firm's lawyers and clients for four years in a row. It was a huge success. People changed their lives to do the route! I loved the organizational details and Blake and I both loved the personal satisfaction we got out of sharing our enthusiasm for outdoor pursuits with others."

With the sea kayaking trips, the mainstay of Batstar Adventures, the only thing they really share is that billion star view. Guests are pampered and spoiled as they kayak the waters of such places as Clayoquot Sound, The Queen Charlotte Islands, Johnstone Strait or the favoured Broken Islands Group, an archipelago of about 100 islands off the west coast of Vancouver Island.

All that Batstar guests have to bring along on their kayaking trips are the clothes on their back. The eight full-time professional guides the company



The Johnson family (L to R) Cassia, 8, Rhonda, Annika, 6, and Blake.

employs in the summer (the guide to guest ratio is a maximum 1:5) take care of all the cooking and cleaning as well as making sure everyone's safe and paddling within their own comfort zone.

Back in 1999 when Batstar first got underway, Blake (certified as a sea kayaking educator) was chief cook and bottle washer as well as lead guide on all the trips. "We started the business from scratch," says Rhonda. "Well, Blake really did. We had a one-and-a-half year old child at the time and I stayed back in Edmonton to practise law while Blake commuted back and forth."

"It cost us around \$50,000 to get things up and running," adds Blake. "We could have done it cheaper but our philosophy is to have premium gear that our guests can count on. It costs more up front but it pays for itself in the end."

At the time, there were fishing boats for hire in Port Alberni, but there was no such thing as an environmentally friendly outdoor adventure tour operator in town before Batstar arrived on the scene. And at first the local townspeople were a little skeptical about the business and its value to the community. Tongues wagged about the newcomers just bringing in tourists with more money than brains. "But now," says Blake, "with our involvement in local community organizations and our vocal and active support of Port Alberni's nascent eco-tourism industry, most people in town have come around. We were even chosen as 2004's 'Entrepreneur of the Year' by the Chamber of Commerce.

While gathering the gear required to launch their award-winning enterprise, Blake also made a promotional brochure that they began circulating and he created a company website (www.batstar.com). Then they waited for the calls they hoped would come in.

"Our first clients were a group of Edmonton doctors who called from Whistler, B.C.," remembers Rhonda. "They were sitting around talking over a glass of wine and had a copy of our brochure and decided they wanted to book a trip—all eight of them. That first booking was a thrill!"

"It may not make for an exciting story," says Blake, "but our first guided trip ran very smoothly. We had taken so many friends and *pretend* clients out before we took our first paying guests that we had all the logistics down pat. Nature does not suffer fools gladly and we weren't about to tempt her."

A mother and baby orca surface in Johnstone Strait.



Nor were they about to tempt the fates by immediately tossing all their eggs into only the one basket, or kayak, as it were. For two years (during which time there was “lots and lots of planning,” says Rhonda) the couple kept one foot in Edmonton and one in Port Alberni before deciding it was “reasonably viable” to put both feet in the water. Of course, if you’re going to radically change your life, why not go all out and throw another child into the mix?

“After our second child in 2000, we decided it was time to take the leap and have me join the business full time,” says Rhonda. “It was tough with two kids but at least they were young enough that the change was easy for them and now, at six and eight, this is the only life they know. They act as unofficial greeters and remind me of what I’ve missed when I’m briefing the guests on how to pack.”

“And they can almost make lattes,” adds Blake, “so our succession plan is working.”

“Seriously though,” says Rhonda, “it was bit scary to take the leap. And then after the initial thrill of the honeymoon period wears off the true test begins. The dangerous and often unmentioned part of pursuing your dreams is that you’re still going to have bad days. Now who do you blame?”

“There’s always the weather,” offers Blake.

Yes, the weather. Canada’s West Coast is notoriously damp, so what happens if guests paying around \$1,400 for four paddling days in the Broken Islands Group to almost \$3,000 for 10 days in the Queen Charlotte Islands encounter weather only a duck could love?

“If conditions are suitable, we dress accordingly and get in the kayaks and continue our trip,” Blake says. “Paddling in the mist and light rain is a wonderful experience. If you keep your head dry, it’s amazing how comfortable it is on the water when it’s raining.”

Since that first group of Edmonton doctors took Rhonda and Blake up on their offer of gourmet meals and visual grandeur, Batstar has taken more than 1000 people on its trips in all kinds of



A paddler is framed against a remote waterfall flowing into the Pacific Ocean in Nuchatlitz.

weather and has recently added the Batstar Adventure Centre and Café to its enterprise.

Throughout it all, “our basic concept hasn’t changed,” says Blake. “We offer first-rate, all-inclusive trips with top notch gear, flavourful, fresh meals, and professional guides. Why mess with a recipe that works? Nature is such a powerful rejuvenator and offering these trips in remote, wilderness settings gives people permission to relax, unwind, and let their hair down.

We look after all the details so people can stop multi-tasking for a week and feel time slowing down.

“The most rewarding aspect to me is guiding a trip and watching busy people moving off the clock. Our guests tend to be leaders and decision makers and sometimes they may take a day or two to give up control. But once that threshold has been crossed, it’s fascinating to watch the real essence of each person come through. At first, it’s hard for many of our guests to let us do all the



camp chores and cooking. But after a day or so they get used to it and they settle in to being a kid again. We have an inside joke, 'If guests are not relaxed by the third day, they're clinical.' ”

“For me,” adds Rhonda, “the best part about running this business is the personal satisfaction I get from watching these trips change people’s lives. In a small way I feel I’ve made a difference in our guests’ lives and that feels great!”

On the downside, she says, “The worst part is the lack of separation between my work and my home. When I practised law I craved for more harmony between work and home. Now that I have it I crave more separation... Murphy’s Law. Bottom line, I’m doing what I dreamed of doing, even if there are bumps along the way.”

“Whenever I wonder if we’re in the right business,” Blake adds, “I think about the amazing guests we’ve had and the friendships that have developed over the years and I know that this is definitely what I want to do. People trust us with their most precious asset—their vacation time. We create a lot of time to relax on our trips and it’s rewarding to see people connect with nature, with each other and with themselves in a very real and significant way that enriches their lives. Life gets real simple on our trips. Staring at a campfire just seems to bring out the best in a person.”

After all the planning, the hard work, the bi-provincial commuting, the two kids to raise while getting a new business off the ground and the anxiety about whether they could actually pull this Batstar thing off, what would they do differently if they could turn back the clock and start all over again?

“I’d pay more attention to what I’m truly good at and hire someone else to do all the other stuff,” Rhonda says. “I’m just now learning to admit that I can’t do it all, and that it’s false economy to think it will be cheaper if I do it myself instead of hiring someone else to do it.”

As for Blake, he has only one regret as he looks back and contemplates what he’d change. “Pictures,” he says. “I’d take more photos.” ■

—Kim Green

Leaving Shadows

Lisa Grekul, '97 BA, '99 MA

Conceived in a fervent desire for fresher, sexier images of Ukrainian culture in Canada, and concluding with a new reading of enduring cultural stereotypes, *Leaving Shadows* is the first Canadian book-length monograph on English Ukrainian writing. The book analyzes works by Maara Haas, Janice Kulyk Keefer, Myrna Kostash, Vera Lysenko, George Ryga, and Andrew Suknaski. (U of A Press, www.uap.ualberta.ca)



The Politics of Multiculturalism: A Ukrainian-Canadian Memoir

Manoly R. Lupul, '50 BA, '51 BEd

The memoir of an academic who played a major role in the Canadian multicultural movement, this account provides insight into the ethnocultural aspirations that gave rise to Canada’s policy of multiculturalism in the 1970s. The book will appeal to readers interested in Canadian culture and politics and in the problem of promoting minority-group rights in democratic societies. (Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies Press, www.utoronto.calcius).



Hitchhiking in the Hospital

Shirley Serviss, '80 BA

In her latest poetry book, Shirley Serviss tackles the grimmer-than-grim subject matter encountered as an Artist on the Wards in the University of Alberta Hospital. This is a wonderfully balanced and heartfelt work, never sentimental or bitter. (Inkling Press, www.inklingpress.ca)



Riding with Rilke: Reflections on Motorcycles and Books

Ted Bishop, '72 BA

Riding with Rilke begins with the account of a near-fatal motorcycle crash Bishop suffered near Kamloops, B.C., and then takes readers on the road through some of the richest landscapes in North America and Europe. The book was short-listed for the 2005 Governor General’s Literary Awards and nominated for the Drainie-Taylor Biography Prize. (Viking Canada/Penguin Group, www.penguin.ca)



Dances with Light and How to Photograph the Canadian Rockies

Darwin Wiggett, '85 BSc, '88 MSc

Filled with light and colour, *Dances with Light* explores the beauty of the Canadian Rockies through the remarkable photography of Darwin Wiggett. In *How to Photograph the Canadian Rockies*, Wiggett shares techniques and tricks for creating stunning photographs. The small, narrow book is designed to be easy to carry and use while photographing in the mountains. (Altitude Press, www.altitudepublishing.com)



Europe 1715–1919: From Enlightenment to World War

Shirley Elson Roessler, '67 BEd, '73 BA, '78 Cert(Arts), '82 MA, '91 PhD, and Reny Miklos

Integrating political, social, economic, and cultural history, Roessler and Miklos provide an entertaining and comprehensive account of the emergence of modern Europe, from the Enlightenment to World War I. Reviews stated, “there could be no better book than this on the topic” (Choice Review) and “a wonderful book ... superbly presented” (H-Net Reviews). (Rowman & Littlefield, www.rowmanlittlefield.com)



Forging Alberta's Constitutional Framework

Richard Connors, '87 BA, '89 MA, and **John M. Law**, '72 BA, '73 LLB

Containing contributions from scholars across Canada—including several faculty members of the University of Alberta—*Forging Alberta's Constitutional Framework* explores the nature and development of Alberta’s constitution by examining a number of celebrated cases and themes that have shaped and altered legal, social, economic, political, and cultural rights and responsibilities within Alberta and Canada. (U of A Press, www.uap.ualberta.ca)

