

The Esquimalt School Bus Legacy Project

It was uncharacteristically hot that week in Nootka Sound. I remember the wind felt like someone was holding a hair dryer up to my face. It was August 14th 2010 and I was guiding one of my long-time customers – Barry Bryant, an oil ‘tycoon’ from Oklahoma. He was actually one of the investors in our family lodge. He was just such a great guy; loved just getting away from it all and spending some time on the boat. He spoke often about how he grew up with fond memories fishing with his dad. These trips were his way of keeping the memories alive of them spending time together when Barry was a kid.

He used to bring at least three different groups up each summer. They were usually customers of his or guys that worked in his machine shop. Sometimes he’d bring a couple of his salesmen. But Barry grew up poor. He figured the oil industry was the best way he could make some good money. He designed directional drilling heads. They say his patents revolutionized the directional drilling industry.

But I can tell you he just came across as a really good guy; old school salt-of-the-earth type. He worked hard to create the business and he shared the wealth by making sure his employees were well taken care of – even in the lean years when the price of oil drops so low that most companies simply fail.

We decided that in order to try and beat the heat that day, we’d head way offshore and try to find a few pinnacles that most guides wouldn’t bother hitting because it was probably a bit too far and too expensive in fuel. So we figured we’d pack the lunches and make a day of it, and we were pretty lucky the sea was super calm and actually pretty relaxing considering how rough things can get out there.

I’d love to say the fishing was outstanding that day but the truth is I don’t really remember. Once you get out offshore and away from the world, your priorities completely change and the day isn’t really measured by the amount of bites you get. It becomes more about the people your with, the surroundings you’re in, and that feeling of freedom being on the ocean – tough to put into words, but I grew up out there and so the draw is pretty powerful. I would say Barry and I shared that feeling.

Barry was always very interested in the wrestling program I started here at Esquimalt. He was a pretty religious guy and he often sponsored different athletes through his church. He was a board member on the print magazine called “The Fellowship of Christian Athletes” and he was proud to be able to support kids and young athletes. Although he and I didn’t really connect on the religious stuff, we definitely shared a passion for supporting youth in sport.

Back in those days we had a significant number of kids on my wrestling team that not only couldn’t afford team trips, but they rarely ever returned a permission form – parents just weren’t in the picture very much. I tried to commit to at least 8 tournaments a year because I could see some of these “unattached” kids were starting to feel like they were a part of something they could be proud of. And although we may not have started this team with a pile of talent, we definitely had kids that were tougher than most of their peers from around the province. These kids had a bit of an edge that other kids just couldn’t match up with. But none of them could afford any of these trips. One year we did 13 tournaments and myself, Deb Courville, and Kidsport Victoria paid for most of it.

That particular day on the boat, I was sharing some of the highs and lows about that team with Barry. We talked about how the need to travel and bond as a team was one of the most important things I felt like I was doing at Esquimalt. There just wasn’t anything significant I was

able to teach in the classroom that I could compare it to. Being in the classroom meant nothing to my wrestlers, but being on the mats and coming together as a team meant everything...literally.

I could write a novel about what happened on some of those trips – from the dine-and-dashes that I had to negotiate with different restaurant management so no one got thrown in jail, to the fist fight downtown Vancouver, the vandalism to the SFU gym, to the parent supplying weed for kids that “couldn’t sleep” in a hotel room, and even kids ordering alcohol at a team dinner like it was totally normal behaviour. Barry usually got a kick out of my stories but he also could see that although it was a grind, it was also worth using wrestling and these trips to in still the much more important hidden agenda of character education.

Barry wanted to help support my little project with the wrestlers so he decided to fund our yearly travel expenses for the school bus. Some of the new staff may not know this, but we used to have an old school bus that the Esquimalt Legion helped the school purchase. It was relatively old by the time I started using it and was a bit expensive to maintain each year. But Barry gave me an envelope full of a few thousand bucks that summer so I could pad the team account for our travel commitments.

Then the next summer the envelope was even more full than the summer before. It’s interesting to work in an environment out fishing where you deal with millionaires and even billionaires. They have the means to do things financially that the rest of us can’t even dream of.

Finally, when our old school bus literally kicked the bucket twice in one year, we were left without this valuable resource I had really taken advantage of as a coach. When Barry turned to give me some cash for my next year’s team travel, I told to him not to worry about it because our school bus had died and we weren’t really sure what we were going to do. He simply smiled and said, “Well how much do you think you need to buy a bus for your team?” I turned him down right away. I didn’t grow up in an environment of money, so entertaining this conversation just felt wrong. But he pressed me to look into it.

Originally I thought I would just go for a used bus for the wrestling team only – and then charge the other school groups for its use. I guess I was thinking if I could charge the other teams and clubs for using the bus, I would be able to maintain the yearly costs of insurance and upkeep. But honestly the more I thought about it, the more I realized that plan was destined to fail. I couldn’t afford any major breakdowns on a used bus and what was I supposed to do?call Barry in Oklahoma and ask for more money all the time? Not gonna happen. I started to consider that maybe the Esquimalt School Community might get behind a “legacy project” of a purchase of a brand new bus, if I could find a way to kickstart the financial burden through a donation from Barry.

In September I brought this dilemma forward to Colin, Carter, and Gord one day in the office. I think it was Carter that commented that the alumni was looking to get behind a new project. After hearing this, I made the call to Oklahoma and asked Barry to consider the new plan. He asked me how much I thought it would take to get enough stake in the game to get serious about the purchase. I told him twenty five grand would not only get the process started, but it might even expedite the process so the kids in our school could start to benefit from team travel again.

To be honest, when the money arrived I turned my back on the entire purchase. I thought that if I injected my personal agenda into things, that it would take away from community members,

alumni, Ribfest, and the Esquimalt Firefighters raising the remaining finances. A project like this needs input from so many different community members in order to make it work. The more people that can get behind something like this ensures the project's success moving forward.

In retrospect, we could have perhaps done a better job of bringing the school students and parents along for this ride but these kinds of experiences only come along on rare occasions and lessons learned can easily be carried forward "to the next time". I say this because I often wonder if our staff and students understand the importance of the bus as a resource for our school. I also wonder if we continue to honour all the hard working folks, alumni, parents and staff that came together to raise the funds for our new bus?

Our school bus came from the idea that kids deserve the kind of education that we don't always find within the walls of our building. Sometimes we need to venture off-campus to gain some perspective on our world. So if you see me after hours or on the weekend washing, vacuuming and scrubbing this valuable resource, it's because we owe it to our students and to all the people that donated their time and money to our school bus legacy project. Sure it may have started because an oil guy from Oklahoma had some extra cash and a giant heart, but our Esquimalt community proudly finished what he started.

I personally thank all staff that use the bus, and have the pride in our school to ensure its cleanliness and presentation to the rest of the world out there. It's worth it.