PACIFIC PORTRAITS

The People Behind the Scenes at Pacific University

VOLUME 1
Our treasure lies in the beehive of our knowledge. We are perpetually on the way thither, being by nature [...] honey gatherers of the mind.
Friedrich Nietzsche

The “Bee Tree”, an iconic ivy-covered tree that stood on the Pacific University campus for many years, was already old and hollow when pioneer Tabitha Brown arrived in Oregon in 1846. Mrs. Brown started a home for orphans that would grow into Pacific University. According to the Forest Grove News-Times, the tree was “said to have housed a swarm of bees who furnished the little old lady with honey which she sold to buy provisions for her orphan children.”
At first glance I think Scot Dobberfuhl looks like the type of guy that caber tosses on his free time. He is about 6’3, with a head of brown hair. He moves carefully, like a giant in a dollhouse. Scot was born and raised in rural Wisconsin. When he was a junior in high school he went to Norway as an exchange student in a small coastal village: “If I could point to one time, that was the it.” Thirty five years later he is still in touch with his host family. He was so moved by his stay that he pursued a job in international affairs. Scot is a program coordinator at the English Language Institute of Pacific University.

The stack of purple folders on his desk are all applications from international students. Scot must go through every one and decide which attend Pacific University, and which
don’t. The international students that get to attend Pacific, but don’t meet its English requirements are put into Scot’s class, where he helps them figure out tasks that can seem menial to English speaking students: “The campus community isn’t really aware of how difficult it is to negotiate some very simple things. Requesting a transcript, paying your bill, whether you want to use block meal or declining balance.” These can all pose as great challenges to someone whose first language isn’t English, for instance, showing his international students how to use easily accessible tools like Google translate to help with roommate applications. Anyone who’s lived in a college dorm can respect the value between a good roommate placement, and a bad one.

When exchange students do conquer these otherwise trivial tasks to English speaking students, it not only greatly improves their stay here at Pacific, but also grows into more: “Often when students gain the confidence to go do those things, they build on that and they will go to New York, or Disneyland. I like watching that and realizing that a little bit of what we do here is helping give students the tools to do that.”

When I ask Scot what’s most challenging about his work he gives a good-natured laugh, and takes a sip from his coffee mug. He goes on to share a recent experience with his international students, “So, I ask about their weekend and they said ‘oh we had some friends over’ and they pulled out their phone and showed me pictures of the meal they had prepared. A Middle Eastern meal. A plastic tablecloth spread out on carpet, the food had been poured directly onto the plastic. You didn’t have utensils because people ate with their fingers. It was a reminder for me that when I’m thinking dinner and they’re thinking dinner, it can be really radically different. We can attempt to communicate, but we are not always connecting. That’s frustrating, but rewarding when we do connect.”

First walking into Scot’s office it is clear what his passion is. Framed international airline posters decorate most of his walls. His bulletin board, which is mostly covered in items from his three daughters, is
home to his model plane calendar. When we ask Scot about aviation he lights up like a kid at Christmas. Before our eyes, the tall, intense man shrinks into an excited little boy who just wants to talk to us about his model planes. “I’m fascinated by anything having to do with aviation.” Carefully taking his calendar off the wall, he presents it to us like a proud father. “These are my friends, and they’re airplanes.” There are not many jet planes in Scot’s collection. He likes to make older planes with propellers that are constructed out of balsa wood, paper and rubber bands.

In our second meeting, our group reveals that we all have been up in noncommercial planes at least once before. Scot’s eyes fill with excitement as we all share our stories. He tells us about meeting his father-in-law for the first time. Like most first meetings Scot was nervous, but the nerves quickly went away when his father-in-law took him up for a flight. “I remember sitting there and thinking, this could go really well for me.”

“Lately, I’ve been doing woodworking, so making musical instruments from wood.” He says quietly, as if this is an easy task. Scot makes kanteles, which are a kind of lap guitar or harp. They are flat, with a triangular shape. Scot doesn’t like being confined to one kind of wood for his kanteles. “These are pretty simple to make, so I use whatever looks nice. They always take longer to make than I think they will.” He answers with a grin. Scot can never be sure how long they will take because each kantele is different and presents its own challenges during construction. The time and care that Scot puts into his instruments is evident when you look at them. The angles have to be just right so that the base is constructed correctly. He also has to oil the wood multiple times. With each oiling, the grain of the wood shines through and gives the kantele personality.

Scot doesn’t make the kanteles for himself. He tells us that he’s sending one to his the host family he stayed with in Norway, and another is going to his parents. He will be keeping the largest kantele for himself when it is done.

I ask if I can play one, and he nods remarking that they are relatively easily to play. I do my best impression of how I imagine the instruments are used, which only produces a couple off-key notes that distinctly pain my listeners. When I give up, Scott’s fingers brush a short song out of the strings. Scot then carefully swaddles the strung kantele in a blanket, placing it lightly away in his Ikeabag with the others.