PACIFIC PORTRAITS

The People Behind the Scenes at Pacific University

VOLUME 1
Pacific Portraits: The People Behind the Scenes at Pacific University (Volume One)

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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.”
Will Perkins, Dean of Students, walks into our interview in tan slacks and a white button-down, one hand in his trouser pocket, the other wrapped round a red Starbucks cup. Against his minimalist appearance, the bright pop of color looks almost out of place, but he is relaxed as he takes a seat with us to begin the first meeting of many he will have today. He has a wide, friendly face that strikingly resembles Kevin Spacey, if Kevin Spacey were an average American suburban man—think *American Beauty* but without all the disturbing connotations. He gestures mildly as he speaks, his voice a mellow tenor. The red cup sits unattended on the table.

Perkins oversees everything under the umbrella of Student Life here at Pacific University, supervising sub-departments like Housing and Residence Life, Learning Support Services, Graduate Support Services, and a whole host of miscellaneous committees and subcommittees. “The way I boil [my job] down for a lot of people is that I help students who are having difficulties, or causing difficulties,” says Perkins. Along with meeting with students individually to help them find solutions to problems that are jeopardizing their success at Pacific, he also serves on a myriad of committees and works closely with all facets of Student Life to help make Pacific a better environment for students to live and learn.

For Perkins, graduation is the most rewarding part of working at Pacific, when he is able to see students he has worked with reach their goals. “I see their name pop up [in the program] and I’m like, *you’re graduating, that’s so amazing!*” Perkins says, his eyes lit up with pride.

Most of his day is spent in meetings, many of which take place in his office in Clark, the center of his working life. In the middle of the
room is a massive oaken conference table, at the head of which he can be found working on paperwork, or on his laptop, glasses perched on his nose; his desk is too far from the window, he says, and too often piled with things to be done—a graveyard of vitamin water bottles and empty to-go mugs.

Before coming to Pacific, Perkins received his doctorate in counseling—his diploma from Arizona State is displayed handsomely in his office—spent many years as a therapist, took a jaunt as a police officer, and worked his way from Director of Student Services in the Optometry Department up to his current position, which he has held for the last three years. With his counseling background, he is able to work easily with students from all walks of life, applying to his work a personal philosophy centered on connection and understanding.

“...the growth of people, to me university is about helping people grow intellectually, but also in other ways. The philosophy is similar to when I was working with kids and families, and that is to try to understand where the person is developmentally, and trying to meet them where they are,” says Perkins.

And with that in mind, when we ask him about a passion outside of his
work, his comment, “My life is pretty cramped,” makes perfect sense.

When pressed for further answers, Perkins delves into his busy life as a parent of two heavily invested children and how when he does have time it’s usually spent with family. Though he used to play soccer when his kids were younger, their activities now take up a large portion of his time. With two preteen kids involved in extracurricular activities everywhere from basketball and band to Lego robotics, their family time is spent on the go as well, leaving few enjoyable passions such as cycling available to him. Perkins even says, “So most evenings if I’m not doing stuff like helping my son or daughter with their homework, I’m actually working at home, and on the weekends, sometimes, I’m doing work stuff, too.”

His dedication to his family and work are an apparent driving force in his life, as one can see looking around his office and noting the homemade foil World’s Best Dad trophy and porcelain Dalmatian. Work and family often meld together with his wife also working on campus, and the times his daughter sells Girl Scout cookies in the UC, something he hesitates to enjoy as his five foot eight daughter can pass as a student at Pacific quite easily.

When we ask if we could expand upon his life outside of work, his knee jerk response of “I would like to, too,” had us all laughing followed by a long pause and deep thought on his part. His hand tucks under his chin as he ponders his answer, which was ultimately more work, though in this case, the domestic
kind, meaning chores. After a little more thought though, he adds that if he had a true free day, he’d probably go for a bike ride, but not in the rain, his Arizona roots make that a bit too much for him. Laughing for a moment, he continues “I rarely go to downtown Portland, so I might go downtown, just do some stuff down there.” Family nights are a more common occurrence, “Sometimes we’ll hang out and play a game, or have a movie night or something like that.” A few years ago he and his wife even went to Hawaii, something that’s more difficult nowadays with his work and his kids’ schedules.

All in all, Perkins’ statement of “I can’t remember the last time it was just, ‘Gee, I’m just going to do whatever I feel like today,’” sums up his busy life. And yet, his devotion to his family, in conjunction with his work create a dynamic and well-rounded man, who occasionally pulls up Kevin Spacey photos online to compare himself to in presentations and interviews.