PACIFIC PORTRAITS

The People Behind the Scenes at Pacific University

VOLUME THREE
Pacific Portraits: The People Behind the Scenes at Pacific University (Volume Three)

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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.”
After ordering a two-dollar-and-fifty-cent breakfast at McDonald’s, Sam Morrison turns to me and says, “You should also write that I’m thrifty.” He has deemed his quotidian routine as Assistant Director of Outdoor Pursuits too unremarkable for me to observe and has instead invited me on a whitewater rafting trip to the Clackamas River. We are joined by three of his students who are training to become paddle guides in rafting. He dons a red raincoat, contact lenses, and an impish grin, a contrast from the bespectacled professor, resplendent in faded plaid I had met earlier in the week. “Are you ready?” he asks with unrestrained enthusiasm.

This enthusiasm for the outdoors was begotten by a “formative experience” he had when he was eighteen years old and pulled over to the side of a dirt road in Mexico to eat at a taco stand. He fondly recalls sitting in his car with his friend, devouring lengua tacos he ordered in clumsy Spanish. “I grew up in a small town from Colorado, so my concept of travel was that you had to have quite a bit of money—you have to buy a package, essentially, like a cruise or a resort vacation or a big hotel. You couldn’t just go down and drive across the border and kind of figure it out.” At the time, Sam held no desire to travel. “It was something rich people did. That’s why the tacos were so formative. It was the experience of eating and interacting [with the locals], being around people and civilization. It showed me that you can just buy a one-way ticket for yourself to anywhere.”

Which is what Sam promptly did. He took a break from his studies as a Studio Art major at Colorado Mesa University and bought a ticket to Nairobi, Kenya. An impulse fostered a habit, and he would eventually earn his bachelor of science in environmental science in 2010 after six years of studies fractured by frequent travels. Throughout those six years and those that followed, he has travelled to thirty-five countries, including Argentina, Chile, Uruguay, Peru, Colombia, Panama, and Costa Rica. It becomes increasingly apparent, however, that his favorite country is Mexico. He became so enamored that he was compelled to move there where he resided comfortably for four years. He bashfully admits to frequenting salsa clubs “at least twice a month” during the three years he spent in Guadalajara.

As we continue our drive towards the river, Sam discusses how he attained Spanish fluency with the
aid of his girlfriends in Mexico. One student gently mocks with a sibilant “Girlfriendssss?” Sam becomes flustered. “How about you write girlfriend?” he asks me. It is amusing to observe Sam and his students fall into an easy rapport. His previous comment in McDonald’s about being “thrifty” earned laughter and garnered a few jabs at his frugal tendencies. Sam rejects the label of “cheap,” however, and insists on “thrifty.” He informs me that he is merely saving money for new gear and equipment; his students do not think it justifies his unabashed affinity for Little Caesar’s pizza.

We arrive at the river and prepare the raft. Brisk air gnaws at our noses and grey clouds threaten to encroach, but good humor prevails. Someone comments that Sam’s new drysuit makes him look like Buzz Lightyear. Sam laughs. Once on the water, they become synchronized as students rotate the role of paddle guide and navigate rapids of varying classes (or ‘difficulty’). He praises one who successfully avoids a large rock and encourages another as we approach a rapid they dub “the toilet bowl.” It is obvious that a profound camaraderie exists between those in Outdoor Pursuits, one they acknowledge is nurtured by the solitude of the wilderness and bolstered by defecating in the woods under compulsion. “Having no bathroom really brings us together,” one student comments.

Sam became aware of a position available at Pacific University’s outdoor program two years ago while he was still living in Mexico—southern Baja California—browsing online ads. I note it requires more effort to prod Sam into discussing the aspects of his job that take place in the office. “I spend a couple hours a day doing lesson planning, a little bit of grading. Right now, I teach Intro to Outdoor Leadership, Intro to Kayaking, and Intro to Expedition Planning. I plan a lot of recreational trips for students.” He adds, “I answer about fifty emails per day.” I ask if there was ever a terrifying moment during an Outdoor Pursuits trip. Without hesitation, he says, “There are no terrifying moments in Outdoor Pursuits.”

In addition to admiring the state’s beauty and being beguiled by ample sites ready for exploration, a specific passion of his also drew him to Oregon: “Hood River up north is kayaking central. People come from all over to kayak in the Columbia River Gorge. Nobody is interested,
though. We have this saying: ‘You know you’re a kayaker when nobody cares.’” He shrugs that off with a laugh. His role at Pacific University seems molded specifically for him, and he expresses pleasure in having found a way to mix his career with his passion. Returning to a university setting is fitting for him, as it was the outdoor program at Colorado Mesa University—the same program that led him to that taco stand in Mexico—that awoke his insatiable desire to travel. “It changed my life, transformed it. More than my degree.”

As our raft glides through the river, a large bird flies overhead. “That’s an osprey!” Sam points and informs us that ospreys feed exclusively on fish and possess special characteristics that allow them to dive directly into water to catch its prey. “They’re my favorite bird of prey.” A jest is tossed at Sam’s expense for naming a favorite bird of prey. “You can’t just have one favorite bird,” Sam retorts.

After I ask about other activities he enjoys, he answers with “climbing” and reveals an impressive list of peaks he has climbed: Mt. Kilimanjaro in 2006; Aconcagua, the tallest peak in South America, in 2009; and Denali in 2011. “At least, those are the ones I put on my résumé.” He thinks for a moment after being asked which peak he would like to climb one day. “I like a challenge…. I think I would like to climb a Himalayan peak.” After a beat: “Not Everest, though. Everyone climbs Everest, you know? It’s too cliché.”

The Clackamas River has been successfully navigated and the crew, some more sodden than others, lift their paddles in the air and crash them together in a celebratory “paddle five.” A light rain begins while my questions devolve into frivolity. Sam and I discover our birthdays are a day apart, and we agree that we both enjoy the company of a fellow Sagittarius. Some time later he makes an offhand comment: “I’ve dated a lot of Pisces.” Sam congratulates his students on their work and arranges for them to congregate at a Little Caesar’s in Portland for a meal. Once we are in the warmth of the school van, Sam turns the radio to NPR; his students groan.