





Jack of All Trades and Master Mentor

Chris Coleman (left) and Andrew Stewart (right) enjoy each other's company at Victoria's Inner Harbour.

What would you expect to learn from a Victoria city councillor, born in Saskatchewan, the son of an Anglican bishop, who grew up on Pender Island and studied law at UBC, played rugby, lived in New Zealand, managed restaurants, advised on Canadian territorial water disputes, took an MBA, and consulted in marketing and corporate governance?

Answer: Just about anything you want.

This diverse resume is precisely what makes Chris Coleman such a rich addition to the UVic Business Executive Mentor Program. Through his broad schooling and work history in law, marketing, restaurant management, board governance, civic politics and community charity work, the well known City of Victoria councillor offers a polychromatic world of experience.

Coleman was the first person who came to mind this past fall when program coordinator Robin Dyke needed a suitable mentor for MBA student Andrew Stewart. A UVic graduate himself (MBA '97), Coleman's eclectic background reads like a mentoring wish list for Stewart. Like Coleman, Stewart lives and works in a milieu that combines business and politics.

"Having Chris as a mentor has been great opportunity," says Stewart, who works as the assistant to the Clerk of the Legislative Assembly of the Northwest Territories. "His background in law, in marketing, in politics, and his ability to make his own job in an entrepreneurial way has been a big inspiration for me."

He says Coleman has also taught him the practicalities of blending business and politics.

“He gives me perspective on the management side of things,” says Stewart. “For example, as a clerk in the Assembly, I’m responsible for my committee budget—including drafting the budget, knowing where the money is coming from, and how it’s accounted for. Chris has developed a unique system in his marketing work where he is able to carefully account for the day-to-day transactions, and who is working on various promotional materials, and he can attribute transactions directly to the marketing they have done. This is real, practical information for me.”

Coleman’s business acumen is partly the product of his MBA studies, but much of it stems from his diverse background. “He’s the kind of person who draws from every aspect of his experience,” says Stewart.

And what a variegated experience it has been. To start, Coleman’s formal education has spanned a number of disciplines.

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He followed a UVic undergraduate degree in Geography with graduate studies in resource management and international tourism, later completed a law degree at UBC with emphasis on environmental and natural resource law in 1984, and then took his MBA at UVic in 1997.

His university studies have in turn supported transitions between numerous jobs and career activities. Coleman managed restaurants for a number of years both during and outside of university studies, and his restaurant contacts led to him becoming the marketing and promotions director for Milestone’s Restaurant on Victoria’s scenic inner harbour, a position he has held since 1991. Following from his law degree, he worked at CFB Esquimalt as assistant judge advocate general, and following from his MBA studies, he has worked as a consultant in marketing and corporate governance. Meanwhile, he has been a Victoria councillor for two terms where his duties have included working with economic development, environment, parks and recreation, and finance and personnel.

Coleman’s time at CFB Esquimalt is the source of an anecdote that typifies the diversity of his experience. His duties ranged from researching international policy on territorial waters off the B.C. coast to assisting individuals in personal legal matters. The research paper he wrote on territorial waters subsequently surfaced during the infamous Canada-U.S. salmon dispute.

“One day I discovered that I was being quoted in the Canadian parliamentary debates as an expert on Canadian territorial waters, and I just about fainted!” Coleman laughs.

Not surprisingly, being involved with so many institutions, organizations and community groups has built Coleman a large network of contacts, and this network has repeatedly helped him create new jobs for himself. A good example is the consult-

ing work he did with the Maritime Museum of British Columbia a couple of years ago.

“It was a neat institution, and I told them, look, you have an opportunity to be a significant player in Victoria. You need to get your image out there, and you need a full-time executive director and a strong board.” Coleman soon found himself in the executive director role for five months while he helped the board find a permanent candidate.

So who were Coleman’s mentors? He lists three: two of them former high school teachers at St. George’s School in Vancouver, and the third local Victoria media icon Mel Cooper. He says Cooper’s confidence and savvy business approach have continuously inspired him, and Cooper was also responsible for involving Coleman in the Christmas charity Santas Anonymous.

Coleman also paints a warm image of Tommy Roxburgh, his English literature teacher at St. George’s. Roxburgh was a former

rugby winger for Scotland who skilfully and affectionately managed his students into enthusiastic study of classic English texts, which otherwise inspired boredom, if not outright loathing.

“The class text was *Adventures in English Literature*, and Tommy used to tell his students at the outset of the year that he would buy a milkshake for anyone who could quote any two lines from the text that he couldn’t identify,” recalls Coleman. “He had an arrangement with a little fifties-vintage diner up on Dunbar Street where he’d send the students with a little slip of paper with his signature, ‘Good for one milkshake.’”

“Well, you can imagine how much everyone poured over their texts trying to catch him. Out of the entire book, we discovered that he had trouble distinguishing between two poems, Milton’s *Il Penseroso* and *L’Allegro*. He probably ended up buying about 20 milkshakes a year, but he had the most articulate English students in the province!”

Reflecting on his own mentoring role with Stewart, Coleman echoes the refrain of other mentors who state they get as much from their students as the students get from them. He draws an analogy from his background as a rugby, soccer and cricket athlete. “It’s kind of like the player-coach philosophy—it’s never going to be simply one way,” says Coleman.

Never one-way. An interesting observation given that a conversation with Coleman frequently takes diverse directions. It is a hallmark of his character that he loves to pursue the multiplicity of ideas and associations that arise naturally when people meet and talk. “I think that’s the value of conversation,” says Coleman. “You reaffirm the interconnectedness of everything, because you don’t do anything in a vacuum.”

It is also a pattern that reflects the rich life Coleman has created by choosing something other than the beaten path. **bc**