

Chris Westdal
A Summer Job for Life
by
Brian Campbell

For Chris Westdal, Pool Pros was “A summer job that never ended.” While in high school, Chris began cleaning pools part-time for Joel Cogan and Danny Stoller, the original owners of Pool Pros. In fact, Joel and Danny had started the business merely as a method of paying for their university education. Chris went on to take Accounting and Financing at McGill University and when he graduated, he enrolled in the CGA program. He bought Pool Pros with the intention of financing his education as Joel and Danny had, but one thing led to another and his plans changed. Chris decided he was a pool guy and decided to make his mark in the industry.

“It wasn’t my ambition to be in the pool industry. But one thing led to another. I guess I was just too interesting to actually become an accountant,” Chris said with a smile.

From there, Chris started to expand and grow the company, adding additional services, products and, consequently, staff. From the time of its incorporation in 1997 to now, Pool Pros has gone from a pool cleaning business employing four or five part-time pool cleaners, to a full-service pool business with more than 30 full and part time staff. Business has increased every year, and he has added a new service, pool installation, this year. He said, “I am excited to work with some of the best in the business on the pool building team.”

“Pool cleaning is what we grew up on and it is still a big part of what we do,” he said. “We also have a service department that repairs and renovates swimming pools. Additionally, we have an office and retail store. In fact, we can do anything with swimming pools except fill them in. We don’t do that.”

Chris believes that a swimming pool is a fun addition to a family’s home, and he wants his business to reflect that attitude. “We want to be the fun company, the

company you want to come and visit,” he said. “We want to be your friend in the industry. We have fun too and it permeates the company.”

Pool Pros relies very highly on referral and repeat business. “You have to listen to your customer and you have to serve your customer,” Chris said. “The best thing you can do is do a good job. Referral is the most powerful marketing tool. Success leads to success.”

Sometimes failure, handled properly, can lead to success, and Chris understands this as well. “Some things don’t go as planned, but the important thing is to make sure to look after your customer,” he said. “Our customers trust us, they know we’re going to do a good job and we will look after their interests; it is a relationship. We always look after our customer and we find that the business follows.”

As Pool Pros grew, it went through a number of transitions, starting in a shed in the backyard, to a small office and warehouse space, then on Wilkes, and finally to its current location on McGillivray. “Being close to home is nice,” Chris said. “This is the area that we have grown up in and many of our customers are in the Linden Woods, Tuxedo and Whyte Ridge areas. We have a lot of space for warehousing our products, our fleet of vehicles, outdoor compound space and our retail store.”

“Being close to Linden Woods is awesome,” he added. “I built my home in Linden Woods in 2000. I have a gate in my fence that opens to my next door neighbour. My daughter and my neighbour’s daughter are best friends and sometimes she comes over and we have a bonus kid for dinner. I know virtually everyone on my street and talk to everyone. I love Linden Woods. I don’t think I’m leaving...ever.”

Chris has a passion for life that he chooses to live by: “I get great satisfaction out of making people happy and helping people. I’m known to have a strong sense of humour. I think it’s important to work hard and have fun and to care about what you do.”

Chris has a tremendous love for his family, his wife Tiffany, his daughters Madison and Abigail and his son Carter. Chris says that Tiffany has helped him in the business and has been a valuable asset to him. His oldest daughter, Madison works at the business part time, but as far as Pool Pros becoming a family business, that is not something that Chris has considered at this point. For now he prefers to keep work life and family life separate.

Chris can't say enough about Tiffany. "My wife is my high school sweetheart," he said with a smile. "I had a crush on her the minute I saw her. I have five to 10 minutes of coffee with her in the morning, then we meet up at the end of the day and it is the best five minutes of the day."

Outside of taking care of the family, Tiffany helps Chris with marketing the business, provides him with a sounding board to bounce ideas off and helps out the office staff at Pool Pros. At home she is the cook, scheduler and organizer, etc. "I don't know what I'd do without her. She really has my back," Chris said. "In the summer, now, she is like a single mom. In the winter I try to make up for it."

Due to the nature of his work, he gets to spend more time with his family in the winter than in the summer. "Usually, in the summer, the kids don't get to see me much until Sunday dinner," he said ruefully. "When the kids were younger, I think they mistook me for a courier."

Chris is very proud of his children. "Carter is my hockey kid. Abigail has the best heart and she's our little worker, I think she didn't fall far from the tree. Madison is our social butterfly, she's friends with everybody and always has a big smile on her face," he said. "I'm blessed to have three great kids."

When not at work or with his family, Chris is a triathlete. He was the Manitoba triathlete of the year in 2011 and did Ironman 70.3 in Florida on April 10 this year. "At 5:45 every Monday, Wednesday and Friday I will be walking into the pool at Pan Am," he said. "Usually on the weekends I meet very early in the morning with a group of triathletes, and we bike and run right through winter. Then we see how many pancakes we can eat. It's a lot."

Of course on race day, Chris' training partners become his competition. He said, "We are really good friends until the gun goes off; then we hate each other. But it's a lot of fun and I love it."

Chris has been training with the same group of people since he got into triathlon in 2008. "It's nice to meet other people with similar interests, who think that self-mutilation for eight hours is normal," he said with a laugh. "It's a small group of people. There aren't many like that."

"Balancing work, family and triathlon is a juggling act," Chris said. "Sometimes I'll wake up and a year has gone by."

All of Chris' kids are very active: Carter with hockey, Madison has her own personal fitness program, including running and has recently been doing some racing and Abigail loves swimming and fencing. "I tried all of the kids in triathlon and they know that it is not for them," he said.

Even with his busy lifestyle, Chris still manages to do some travelling with his family. He started his life travelling, having spent some time living in both England and Africa as a child, and the travel bug stayed with him and has been passed on to the rest of his family. "We've been all over the world," he said. "Spring Break is usually a big trip. Our kids know their way around an airport."

Chris intends to continue to challenge himself in every area of his life. "It is always great to try different things every year. It is important in everyone's life to challenge yourself," he said. "As a triathlete, we learn to challenge ourselves to the max all the time. You always need to put everything you can into a relationship to make it better, and the same can be said in the world of business. If you just sit around and watch the clock, it is a waste of time. You need you adapt to change quickly and have goals, have a plan."