

Yvonne Bayer-Cheung and Thomas Bayer
Living Life at the Peak
by
Brian Campbell

Yvonne Bayer-Cheung never expected to meet her future husband on the side of a mountain; for a person who is born and raised in Winnipeg, mountain climbing is not a common activity; but that is exactly where she met Thomas, 21 years ago.

“I was teaching English in Japan, and I was climbing Mount Fuji with a friend of mine from Winnipeg who was also teaching,” Yvonne said. “We happened to run into Thomas with his group on our way there. We made introductions and decided to climb the mountain together.”

After graduating with a Bachelor in Human Ecology in Foods and Nutrition at the University of Manitoba, Yvonne felt the desire to do some travelling before going back for her Masters of Business Administration (MBA). Yvonne said, “I applied for the Japan Exchange Teaching Program (JET), which is what sent me there.”

At the same time, the engineering firm that Thomas worked for in Germany, sent him to their Japan office to provide technical support for mobile cranes to both their Tokyo head office and their repair facility 70 km outside of Tokyo.

“I helped them with technical support and communications with Germany,” Thomas said. “So they sent me to Japan, and that’s where Yvonne and I met at the bottom of Mount Fuji,” he added. “It is an overnight pilgrimage, so you want to start at around 10:00 pm. The goal is to see the sunrise from the top of the mountain.”

The two groups went out for drinks together in Tokyo the following evening and decided to stay in touch. “We all went to the beach the following week and Yvonne came along,” Thomas said. “Then we saw each other once or twice a week and eventually started dating.”

Of course it had always been Yvonne’s plan to return to Canada, so when her teaching stint came to an end a year later, it was time to come home. “Once I got

into the International MBA program at York University in Toronto, that was when I knew I was coming back to Canada,” Yvonne said. “So Thomas decided to put in his papers to immigrate to Canada.”

But life doesn't always work out as smoothly as we would like it. “The firm I worked for didn't have a Canadian operation, but they did have an operation in Cleveland,” Thomas said. “So I was posted in Cleveland, and on weekends I would drive up to see Yvonne in Toronto.”

Six months later, Thomas got his papers to immigrate to Canada and when Yvonne completed her MBA, they got married in Winnipeg. They both got jobs in Toronto and started their lives there, but two years later, things changed yet again. “I was working for the Canada China Business Council,” Yvonne said. “And after two years, I was sent to China as the General Manager for their China offices in Beijing and Shanghai.”

Fortunately, Thomas' qualifications and extensive work experience abroad made it easy for him to find work anywhere and he got a job with a Dutch trading company in Beijing, while taking his MBA there. Then they got pregnant and Yvonne felt that it was time to come home. She said, “I wanted to be closer to my mom and dad and my brothers, who are all in Winnipeg.”

Thomas quickly got a job at Standard Aero in Winnipeg, which made it easier to come home. Yvonne's family were in the process of opening two new Palatal Express Restaurants, so Yvonne stepped right into the role of helping them.

They also managed to find their family home in Linden Woods. “We had our hearts set on River Heights because I grew up there, but the housing market was hot and we couldn't find what we wanted,” Yvonne said. “My best friend lived in Linden Woods and this place had just gone on the market, so we came the first night of the showing, and as soon as we saw it, we thought, ‘this is it’.”

Yvonne and her family have always been very involved in the food industry, first through opening and managing Palatal Barbecue Restaurant, which opened in 1992, with her mother, Susan Cheung, and her father, Dr. L.K. Cheung, then with the Palatal Express Restaurants and she continues to work behind the scenes as the family, including her two brothers, opens and expands new locations in the city, including the new ZA Pizza Bistro in St. Vital. But she also has a second passion...dance!

“I took ballet, jazz, musical theatre,” she said. “That was all part of my love for dance. My family is very involved in the Chinese community and my mother ran a Chinese Folk Dance group in Winnipeg. I learned numerous traditional Chinese Folk Dances from my mom. It is because of my mom’s love for dance and the community that I have that same desire today.

As a hobby, Yvonne became a certified group fitness instructor for a large gym and really became passionate about teaching fitness. With her love for both dance and fitness, Zumba seemed to be a natural choice for her, so she became a licenced Zumba instructor. She was looking for things for their daughters Julia (13) and Katherine (11) to do, which connected her with Tim Green, the General Manager of Linden Woods Community Centre. “Tim asked me what I did, and I told him that I taught Zumba,” she said. “He said, ‘you should start a Zumba program here at the Centre’.”

So she started teaching Zumba, first on a part time basis, but now it has grown into a full time occupation and she started her own business, ‘Yvonne’s Fitness’. There is a wide variety of Zumba classes that Yvonne teaches. She said, “I teach Zumba classes, Zumba Toning, with one or 2.5 pound toning sticks, Zumba Kids, Zumba Gold, for the active older population, Zumba Step and Aqua Zumba. I usually teach around 15 or more classes weekly, seven days a week, including Yoga, which is my other passion.”

Yvonne does a lot of Zumba Parties, Zumba Fundraisers, and Zumba Kid’s Birthday Parties and Master Classes. She also teaches around the city at schools, daycares and special events.

“What is great,” Yvonne stated, “is that I teach where I live. So that despite being very busy, it still gives me a lot of flexibility to be there for my family when I need to be. I can still pick up the kids from school and get them to their dance or gymnastic classes. I can be home to cook supper, even if it means that I may have to go out again after the kids are in bed.

“I feel that I have the most amazing job right now,” she added. “I love the restaurants, I miss the customers there, but I love what I am doing right now. Giving the gift of health and wellness to people is very, very rewarding. Zumba is so much fun that you don’t even know that you are exercising. It’s such a positive and happy atmosphere, people leave with a smile and thank me at the end of the class, but they did all the work themselves.”

Thomas now works in senior management at CAA Manitoba, but he also works behind the scenes at Yvonne's fitness classes, setting up the stage for special events, creating her client database, or even helping with sign-in at her classes.

"People always say to me that you are so lucky to have such a supportive husband," Yvonne said. "I tell them that I can't do what I do without Thomas."

Both Yvonne and Thomas still have the travel bug and try to find time to get away with the kids.

"For the last four years, I have hosted a Zumba/Yoga vacation from Winnipeg to Mexico, and we take the kids along" Yvonne said. "In February we have been taking a group of about 30 of my students and family to the Mayan Riviera. The kids love it. We have also gone to visit Thomas' mother in Germany. And we have taken the girls to visit my relatives and friends in China."

But, as much as they enjoy travelling, they love coming home to Linden Woods. "You can get everything you need in the area," Thomas said. "You don't have to leave to get anything."

"We feel very comfortable and safe in the neighbourhood," Yvonne added. "Whether it is going for groceries, taking the kids to school, to dance or to gymnastics, or meeting friends. Everything is all close by."

Thomas likes biking in the neighbourhood and they all like to go out for family walks. Thomas said, "Because of Yvonne's business, when we go for walks we often run into one of her clients. Of course many of her clients have become friends."

"I almost feel like the community centre is my second home," Yvonne said with a laugh. "We love this neighbourhood and the people who live in this community. Ever since the girls were babies, we have walked the Lindenwoods Drive circle several times a week. This area is our home."