

of support, financial, getting the railway corridor open, people are actually cooperating, the local story in my view has never been better than in 35 years.”

Cambridge Mayor Craig says, simply, “Our business is not with each other, it’s about competing.”

Kitchener Mayor Vrbanovic agrees. “It’s all about competing against the rest of the world, not about competing with each other.” He points to examples of cooperation between the cities, such as the move of Google from Waterloo to Kitchener, and the reverse migration of Stantec from Kitchener to Waterloo. He smiles that, when Kitchener helped Héroux Devtek find new property in Cambridge, because there was no appropriate Kitchener property for the company’s expansion, in the end the firm opened a new Cambridge facility but retained their Kitchener space, as well.

Vrbanovic opts for first-name basis with his fellow urban mayors: “This is the kind of approach Doug, Dave and I have been taking.”

In their interviews with Exchange, the three mayors – and many of the other local experts – have moved beyond the Waterloo EDC brand question to discuss branding on both larger and smaller levels – from the Toronto-Waterloo Corridor to smaller, neighbourhood business communities that are growing up in the cities, largely through the process of infilling and brownfield development. There will be more about these themes in the next issue of Exchange Magazine.

SUCCESSION - AND THE UNIQUE BRAND

Groundhog Divers is a niche retail destination travel business that demands a high degree of technical expertise

Working throughout the stages of business ownership has its ups and downs. Nowhere is this experience more intense than when you’re operating your own business, in partnership with your spouse. With each up comes a new opportunity, and when you’re 30 years into the cycle, you start to look for the next logical transition.

That’s the stage where Bruce and Yvonne Kingsbury, owners of Groundhog Divers, find themselves. Still in love with the business, still in love with the industry, and still in love with their clients, they’re nonetheless at the point where they need to start thinking of the next stage. And with some businesses, that’s not so easy. The Kingsburys run Groundhog Divers, a specialty retail and destination travel business that is unique in so many ways.

The Kingsburys are second owners, purchasing the business nearly three decades ago, on a handshake and with a love for diving. They bought it from some very close friends and mentors, Mike and Margaret Gerus. Mike and Margaret started the business in 1983. Bruce and Yvonne took over the business approximately six years later.

“The transition was a little back and forth, while Mike and Margaret were establishing things down there,” com-

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ments Bruce. “Down there” is Cozumel, Mexico, where the Geruses built a second business that served the training, certification, and recreational diving market. It was a niche market whose dedicated patrons commit to lifestyle of diving.

Diving is a hobby where not only a person’s vacation time is spent in pursuit of the sport, but also a modest supply of money. The Geruses saw a huge growth opportunity in the destination dive business. They established the Papahog Scuba Emporium in Cozumel, a location offering a relatively close, year-round diving destination for the Kitchener/Waterloo and Southern Ontario enthusiast.

Establishing a viable business in another country takes, a lot of patience and a lot of money. Eventually the Geruses were able to attain dual citizenship, making Cozumel their permanent home. And the Kingsburys took over Groundhog Divers, the most diversified scuba training centre in the KW area. After three decades, it still attracts the adventure-minded traveller.

The two couples started in a business environment so different from today. Bruce recalls the first year that Groundhog Divers was in Kitchener, he met Mike, and Bruce became a diver. Soon Bruce worked his way up to the instructor level, and as Mike and Margaret were beginning the transition to Mexico, started to help out. “Then, we were down in Cozumel, visiting with them and over a couple of beers and a handshake we bought this place.”

Over the decades, “things have changed”; the customer



Bruce Kingsbury, left, and Kyle Main of Groundhog Divers

has adapted and evolved as the technology has improved. The driving factor is now a person’s bucket list. Certification is required, as your life depends on understanding and monitoring key factors, such as how much air you have to breathe. The 20-minute resort pool lesson can be somewhat misleading.

The joy of the destination, the camaraderie of the people and experience shared with new friends, at the end of the day is priceless.

Bruce and Yvonne are currently in a transition; they need

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Groundhog Divers founders
Mike and Margaret Gerus, at
their Papahog Scuba Emporium.

thing related to diving comes up in their lives, our name will pop into their mind." When Kyle started to tell friends about his new career at Groundhog Divers, "it always begged a question, and the conversation followed. It gives me that opportunity to say 'Yeah it's this dive shop,' and if you want to find out more ..." – Jon Rohr X

a successful succession plan. Enter the millennial like no other millennial: Kyle Main. Main is a Kitchener native, whose parents moved around the world as missionaries. Kyle spent a lot of time living in Colombia, where the young man met his wife. He speaks fluent Spanish, (handy, as most of the closer diving destinations are in Spanish-speaking countries). When he was 18, he returned to Kitchener looking for a job

"Yvonne said, you really have to talk to him," so Bruce did. "He's of that millennial generation, but his approach to life, his insight to people and his wisdom – he's not a millennial in so many of the ways that I've encountered. He fit right in and has been with us ever since."

Main was at the right place at the right time. After five years, he is now 23 years old, managing partner and in succession to own a very cool and interesting dive shop.

There is a difference between experiencing diving and being a diver. There is a certain amount of education that needs to take place. And once you have the education you must practice. "It's one thing to take a scuba course to go to the Dominican so you can dive at your cousin's wedding. That's a completely different things than learning how to dive and been a proficient diver. We're able to show our customers that there is more to this than just the experience," says Bruce.

One of the unique experiences Groundhog Divers offers is that, surprisingly, there are many opportunities to dive, locally. "We have a tremendous opportunity for diving here, we encourage a weekly and twice weekly local dive at a beautiful location that Groundhog Divers has exclusive access to. We do a lot of our training there, we have access to it all year long." Bruce took a number of local divers and did a big New Years Day dive there. "The water was so crystal clear you could see 60-70 feet deep." The location is a bit of a secret, but it's only 20 minutes from the business's Victoria St. location. "That's been a very positive thing for us," adds Bruce. "We also have an indoor pool," located behind their Kitchener retail store.

So what's with the Hog theme? "The whole hog thing works so well," says Bruce. "So many people remember us for such a long period of time, and it's pretty clear that any-



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